

**I AM  
TIRED OF  
MARCHING**

In conversation with  
Lawrence Lemaoana

**VILLA-LEGODI**  
Centre for Sculpture

This conversation took place during Lawrence Lemaoana's residency at NIROX / Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture in 2022. It was subsequently transcribed and edited, first appearing in *FORM Journal's* first issue, "Time," published on 29 March 2023. To access the complete issue, click [here](#).

*FORM* is an open-access journal dedicated to sculpture. Initiated by the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture, it aims to enrich critical debate about the medium, adopting an interdisciplinary approach that encourages contributions in all shapes and sizes, from academic texts, interviews, and artistic research to poetry and prose. Each issue grapples with a particular topic that is intentionally broad, allowing for a diversity of perspectives and avenues for engagement.



Lawrence Lemaoana, *Democracy is Dialogue*, 2015. Beyers Naude Square, Johannesburg, South Africa. Courtesy of the artist.

## I'm Tired of Marching

Lawrence Lemaoana

**Sven Christian [SC]:** Let's talk about the initial impulse for *I'm Tired of Marching* (2022), when you decided to produce something automotive?

**Lawrence Lemaoana [LL]:** My process is nomadic. Even though some elements are repeated, I rarely go with the first impulse. I'm often prompted by YouTube videos, music, literature... Something I read might spark an idea, which takes time to marinate. So, *I'm Tired of Marching* began with thinking about protest. I was at Wits during #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, and I got to observe how students organised and found forms of protest that didn't break the law but were still deeply subversive. I also witnessed a sit-in in front of Luthuli House, which was a powerful moment

for me — it was a contemporary form of protest that spoke directly to power, in the language of power. It's an example of how every generation has its own way of defining itself, yet I keep thinking of protest as a kind of reenactment.

Another plug was a speech by Martin Luther King Jr., in which he says, 'I'm tired of marching for something that should have been mine at birth.' That line has become ingrained in society's psyche. With every generation it reactivates, but differently. So it prompted a series of reflections on protest — things that I'd come across or works that I'd made. One was a public monument, organised by Lesley Perkes, the CEO of ArtatWork, that I created on Beyers Naude Square in Joburg. It dealt with past forms of protest, particularly the

Women's March of 1956. There was a famous photograph of a woman carrying a baby, with a placard that reads, 'With passes we are slaves.' It made me think about how the body is always present in protests, at least in Southern Africa. It's always physically involved.

For that work, I'd also been thinking about Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, and how in theatre you have a protagonist, which is not dissimilar from politics. So in South Africa, you have black people on one side and white people on the other, and some kind of mediator in between. I made this stilt, as a foundation for this woman to step on. It's thick at the bottom then tapers upward onto her feet. I liked that it was precarious, because public monuments don't last in the city. At the same time, I wanted to acknowledge the violence that comes with liberation monuments. In the Virgin Islands, for example, you had the Three Queens of the Caribbean who started a revolt called Fireburn. Their monument depicts three women holding a knife in one hand and a fire torch in the other. Then you have the Statue of Liberty with her torch — fire as necessity. It's like that scene in *The Jungle Book* about being given man's red fire. It felt like a request for power, because fire has that ability to create, destroy, and transform things.

My own version was more ambiguous — it could be read as a molotov cocktail or a candle in a bottle. When I grew up, that's how you lit the house. So she's holding a bottle with a candle in one hand and a placard that reads "Democracy is Dialogue" in the other. For me, the ambiguity straddles this precipice between liberation and violence. At the same time, I was questioning the nature of democracy as a form of communication; that in this country, we choose our politics like we choose our soccer teams — according to colour combinations.



Lawrence Lemaoana, detail of *Democracy is Dialogue*, 2015. Beyers Naude Square, Johannesburg, South Africa. Courtesy of the artist.

**SC:** Can you talk about the particular movement of *I'm Tired of Marching*, this mechanical rotation?

**LL:** I wanted to mimic toyi-toyi. When I began to research this form of protest I was told that it originated in Zimbabwe and was later appropriated by South Africans. When I looked it up, I found that it's linked to the struggle veterans who trained in places like Algeria and Egypt. So it has this military background, and travelled south to become the staple diet of protest language in South Africa.

This up-and-down motion also connects to a work that I made a few years ago, called *Newsmaker of the Year* (2008). It was an image constructed in textile, using the spiritual fabric of the Palu, which has white, blue, and red stripes. The stripes parallel each other, to the point where they almost read as being



THIS PAGE: Lawrence Lemaoana, *Newsmaker of the Year*, 2008. Embroidery on textile, 107 x 203 cm; NEXT PAGE: Lawrence Lemaoana, detail of *I'm Tired of Marching*, 2022. Automotive protest machine and greenscreen, dimensions variable. Images courtesy of the artist.

cinematic. I filled that section of the textile, the 'film strip,' with an image that I found on the front of the *Mail & Guardian* of Jacob Zuma marching. He had one leg up, the other down, and his one fist in the air. It was a celebratory image, with this figure stylised and flattened into letters, like a collage. I fixated on this image and chose to duplicate it to read like an animation, where each time the figure is reversed to mirror the one before, creating a sense of movement. For *I'm Tired of Marching* I commissioned an engineer to try replicate this motion. I had a simple idea of a disc, with two arms that would rotate. Eventually we decided on a central base, using a car-window motor to power the rotation.

I enjoy this process of placing disparate materials in conversation. It reminds me of this beautiful passage from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), where a motorcycle is being taken apart. The author describes the function of each element and its connection to others. I found that anatomy quite interesting in relation to the singular

and collective nature of protest, but also the bareness of protest.

**SC:** And the placard?

**LL:** The placard is a collage of traditional kanga fabrics that I cut out to read "I Am Tired of Marching." It's evolved, because I've decided to include lighting on the inside, to make the words pop, but it looks at the anatomy of the placard and this reoccurring idea that freedom of expression needs to be fought for. As Baldwin says, 'Freedom is not something that anybody can be given; freedom is something people take and people are as free as they want to be.'

I've also been interested in the process of conceptual artists like Marcel Duchamp, too, and how he appropriates and borrows from the world and recontextualises things within the gallery. My other obsession is Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), particularly the use of many vocabularies to speak about one thing. Dread Scott used the same method

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Lawrence Lemaoana, installation view of *I'm Tired of Marching*, 2022. Automotive protest machine and greenscreen, dimensions variable. UNISA Galleries. Courtesy of the artist.

in *What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag* (1988), but with the flag as the trigger. It's placed on the ground, with a visitors' logbook above it. On the wall above that is an image of the flag, draped over the coffins of soldiers who died in the war. It's a highly political work that went all the way to the Supreme Court. Some people thought it was blasphemous, anti-patriotic, and so on. Then free speech kicked in. But it's not a purely scientific form of representation, which for me is what conceptual art is intended to do. It's about clarity. In my work, that manifests through the inclusion of the protest machine, the structural engineer's blueprints on how to build it, and some kind of description of the machine.

**SC:** The one thing that stands out for me is circulation, be it through mass production or mass media, through the replication of an artwork, the appropriation of an object, or this idea of history repeating itself. Perhaps more important though is the question of what sticks, or why certain things land, and the role that different contexts perform in making things — phrases, images, symbols — stand out.

**LL:** It's something I think about a lot in terms of art, which is almost a world unto itself. How do those things perform outside of that structure? There's an element of performance and celebration when black people in South Africa protest — this sense of taking to the streets — but it's different in other parts of the world. To your point about circulation, in terms of spreading the word or going in circles — I always think of it like the ghost car in *Gran Turismo*, where you race around the track and on your second lap you create a ghost car and you chase yourself. There's a ghosting that happens, a *deja-vu*.

**SC:** The function of that ghost car is so that you don't repeat the same mistakes though, right? Like if you take a corner too wide in the previous lap, you can see it happening in the ghost car and correct in time.

**LL:** Exactly. But the very powers that we're protesting against come from us. The ANC understands the mechanics of protest, its anatomy, so they can squash it whenever. One of the factors during *#FeesMustFall* was that



one leader was working with ANC leadership. She had this celebrity status, which was compounded by a famous image of her with an ANC kanga on her head, with her fist in the air. There's an element of celebrity that joins itself to protest. And we look for these iconic moments, as if there must be an image to represent what is happening. But often these images betray what is being fought for. The ritual does itself in through selective leadership.

**SC:** How does that work when it comes to the isolation or selection of particular sentences in your work?

**LL:** It's intuition. If I land on a sentence it's either because I feel like it's been repeated ad nauseam, or because it serves as a recall to a particular time. The repetition says, 'You know you need to do this.' Sometimes the phrases are direct quotes. Sometimes they're tweaked by limiting the phrase to eight letters. It's about trying to say something with as few words as possible, to be impactful. You distill the phrase by writing it over and over again, thinking about it in different contexts.

**SC:** So you find a particular phrase that's in circulation, and isolate it, but then in the process of working them into the fabrics you tend to disguise them. They become difficult to discern. With this work, you spoke about wanting to use lights to make them pop, which is a bit different. Here you're entering into showbiz territory. It seems more like a sales pitch.

**LL:** Exactly. In thinking around these fabrics, I try to stick with the red, black, and white ones, because these are spiritual colours — there's a symbolic weight behind them. But they're also in-between colours. There's an ambiguity about them, in terms of what they mean, which echoes my interest in these phrases and words. When I read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), for example, I looked for that phrase. I read it

a few times, thinking there must be a moment when he uses it, but he never does. It comes from W.B. Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming" (1919): 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.' For me it was this layering, distilling something and applying it to a different context to speak about a particular moment in Nigerian history. I then looked at how headlines operate. You have these catchphrases that either make you happy or sad, but draw you in to buy the newspaper. It's thinking about how these things become cultural items that don't necessarily have to have their moment to shine, because they're already in the system.

**SC:** Again, for me, it's about circulation: how toyi-toying is carried, translated, and interpreted to become iconic of protest culture here in South Africa, in the same way that *Things Fall Apart* is pulled from Yeats — neither point you back to the origin, at least not without prior knowledge, but they continue to have a life of their own.

**LL:** Exactly. We don't produce our own kangas either. They're imported from elsewhere. But the kanga, for me, is a means of communication. During Jacob Zuma's rape trial, for example, he said that Khwezi [Fezekile Kuzwayo] was wearing a kanga. For him that signified consent, but he appropriated how kangas are used in East Africa as a communicative device. So kangas in East Africa communicate differently to those here. In East Africa they're used to say what cannot be said in public. They're gift-giving objects, and the gift tells you how the person feels. If I don't like you I'll wear a kanga that has something insulting to you on it, and I'll make sure you see it. So there's this underlying communication that is visible to everyone. Textile companies also seek new idioms that they use as illustrations. One might be for interpersonal communication between a wife and a husband. It might be like 'The mangoes are ripe,' and it will have an illustration of a mango tree and a

ladder to say 'It's on tonight.' So Jacob Zuma took that and applied it to serve himself, which is a form of appropriation, but we do that all the time in art. We recontextualise stuff to give it new meaning. The kangas in South Africa are not used in the same way. They're more for sangomas and spiritual diviners, but they're also given to clients who will put water on them so that they're spiritually charged. There's a whole ritual to transform them from ordinary textiles into these spiritual things.

**SC:** Something that stuck out for me when I saw the work — its skeleton — was its IKEA-like quality. Not only the kind of wood used, but how you can see all the parts, the assemblage aspect and the fact that it came with instructions... You touched on this when speaking about Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, but there's also this DIY aspect that relates to the kind of fatigue expressed in the title.

**LL:** Yes, it's almost like I'm tired of being tired. I need an outlet, somebody to do it on my behalf. I need to be able to go chill on the beach, and the machine can speak for me. It's about handing responsibility over to someone else. That's been a reoccurring theme in the work. How do I allow the protest to carry on without me? How can I give others the ability to do the same?

**SC:** Withdrawal is something that I keep returning to in my own writing — the refusal to engage, and how silence often speaks louder than words. My thinking was inspired by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, who talks about a mode of withdrawal from the necessity to perform oneself in public. He's talking about Taqqiya, which is a piece of Islamic jurisprudence that effectively gives one the right to lie in contexts where they face potential persecution, in terms of your faith.

**LL:** So it's almost like taking the fifth in America?

**SC:** He actually starts out by saying that in America you have the fundamental right to remain silent, but in doing so there's also this assumption of guilt. Similarly, you have freedom of speech but there's no legislation that protects the voice itself. It may protect the semantic content of your words, but these days, tech is used to mine the voice. So withdrawal, silence, becomes quite an important means of protest.

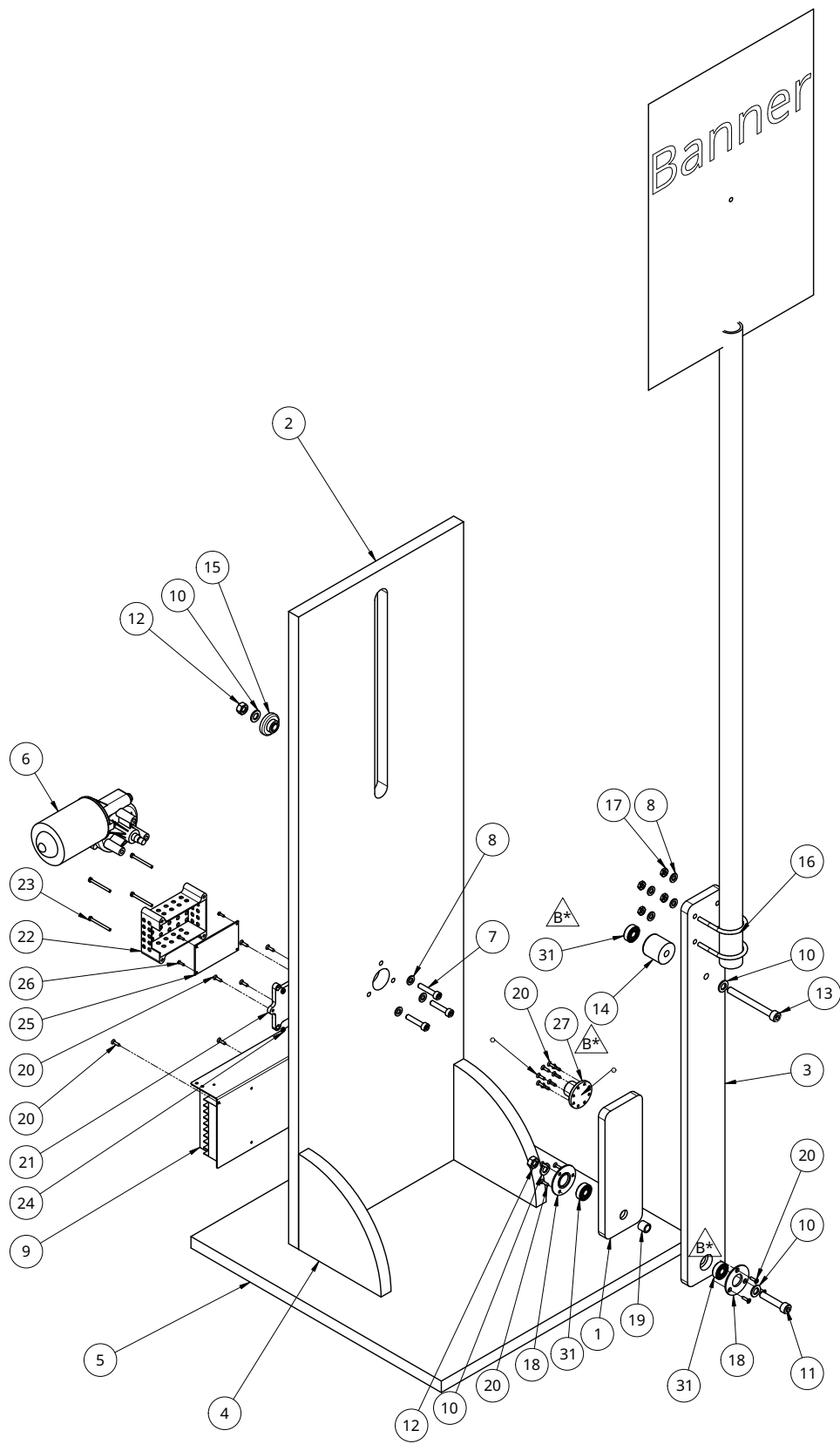
**LL:** That is so interesting. Words tend to have this second life. They can be raised and then suddenly lose their momentum. It's almost like the fragility of the word. It's a continuous obsession of mine: 'In the beginning was the word, and the word became flesh.' I think about the reverse. There's a point where the words that we express don't materialise, but defragment and become useless. They become inanimate, voiceless.

**SC:** Through over saturation?

**LL:** Through over saturation, through being ignored, even through their own structure. Like, why in 2022 am I still protesting for basic things, or for what should be available to everyone? I'm so exhausted of trying to articulate the fact that I need to relax. I need to live. I need to breathe.

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*Lawrence Lemaana was born in Johannesburg in 1982, where he lives and works. His art critically engages with mass media in present-day South Africa. Seeing the relationship between media and the 'people' as inherently problematic, he identifies and repurposes existing control apparatuses using his trademark cynicism. Lemaana's embroidered works are emblazoned with appropriated political dictums woven in kanga fabric — a material with its own complex ancestry. Here, Lemaana wages criticism on the agency of local media, and its ability to shape social consciousness: the result turns didactic and propagandistic tools on their head.*



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# VILLA-LEGODI

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