

Q&A with Rieke Vos & Jackie Karuti

In late 2025, I undertook a residency at Teylers Museum in Haarlem, Netherlands. Over the course of the six weeks, the curator for contemporary art at the museum; Rieke Vos & I met almost every Monday over coffee and exchanged thoughts about how I intended to *enter* the museum. This Q&A compiled by Rieke is a condensed version of my notes.

Rieke Vos: You have done numerous residencies in the past, but perhaps never in a museum before. So, I am curious to ask you about this experience, to understand what – if at all – the residency offered to your practice.

Jackie Karuti: The residency offered a chance to think about measuring as a way to consider the weight that history, objects and images hold.

RK: In your essay in the book *Mattering Matters* you write about durational time, “One can then say that durational practice is about how ideas come to us and that is over time, slowly & registered through unusual channels & frequencies that demand a certain awareness & intuition.” Museums have duration, technically they are not a living creature, but I actually do think they have a life and, in many cases, – such as Teylers – it extends far beyond the lifetime of a human. When you quote Bergson saying – duration is the inner life of things – I wonder, are the custodians of the museum part of its inner life?

JK: If we can imagine the museum as something with life then indeed, the custodians of the museum are part of its inner life. The museum is not the building but the responsibility it holds, not just in preserving objects but also in accounting for how time is spent.

RV: I was curious what your ideas are about durational time in relation to museums in general, but also in relation to doing a residency at a museum?

JK: The living being has duration. It has duration precisely because it is continuously elaborating what is new. In that sense, durational practice complicates structure. In the case of a museum such as Teylers, I think rather than looking at the prestige and age of the museum, I was more attuned to the fact that ‘entering’ the museum posed an impossibility for me and that my accessibility would require more time and angles of entry.

RV: We might assume that museums are organised, categorised, structured, on top of things. This image is also what the Enlightenment-to-Modernistic world view – with which they have been established – suggested or tried to uphold. But in my experience, museums are in fact quite messy. They omit, they neglect, they misplace. They put things away properly and they forget where they’ve put it. But is the museum messy, or it us – the humans - that move through it like a superorganism unable to ever fully oversee its ecology?

JK: It's interesting how you frame the museum as a sentient being. Museums are not inherently messy I don't think. Living is what's complex. I'm largely in favour of scholarship, practices and a life that complicates structure. During the residency at Teylers, I read a book by Nadine Ghandour about (the impossibility of) naming, searching and wayfinding in libraries. One of the conclusions I drew was that similar to the library, the museum catalogue as an index and inventory of holdings seems anti-ethical to the serendipitous discovery preferred by artists. Additionally, classification systems that still uphold and carry within them colonial hierarchies privileging western thought need to be abolished.

RV: Can one measure the museum?

JK: Yes. Measuring here means to observe something with great care and consideration rather than assigning numbers and value to physical properties. It should be thought of in relation to indigenous people who have always acted as keepers and custodians of their world. Measuring the museum demands thinking about dimensions that are not limited to shapes, area & volume but inclusive of happenings and experiences in the communities that occupy a given space.

RV: In one of our previous conversations, you said that magical realism might be a way to describe a museum. I was wondering if you could deconstruct this idea a little bit for me. Perhaps starting with the realism, which we break down into its territory, its architecture, its spatial measurements, as well as its masse, its temperature, its longevity, its age. Then how do we regard its magic, the undercurrents, the speculations? I'd be very curious to hear how you would define these things?

JK: I think a wonderful way to answer this would be to reference a surreal film by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles called Bacurau. It is set in an undisclosed future in a small rural settlement in Brazil that has been erased from the map. Bacurau employs magical realism in a way that the militant uprising and startling violence in the film does not make light of present-day political struggles. The museum in Bacurau takes on a pivotal role that is symbolic, historical and magical when the guns exhibited inside the museum are later used to save the village from invaders. While the film unfolds through brutal and absurd hallucinogenic visions, it offers a vision of a caring, anti-capitalist society focused on the collective, away from the dominant western gaze.

RV: Drawing is a practice that you seem to go back to, as a way of measuring, but also to undo what measuring does. You write: Measuring something that is alive is akin to eating something that is living or being. [...] It sees a thing as an object & not being sentient. From this perspective, what does drawing offer you?

JK: Drawing offers me a way to produce and think about images in a way that requires the labour of feeling with or through them. Measuring ceaselessly, mercilessly and exhaustively is how humans make sense of the world. Measuring something that is alive reminds us of the abolished practice of phrenology for example, which was used to justify racism and social hierarchy by claiming that skull shape and size dictated intelligence and personality traits. Measuring is also about accumulation, and not just through addition or multiplication but through division as well; where division equals land acquisition and dispossession. Measuring is a way of thinking about untenable but ownable territory and space. It is also reminiscent of the infamous division of Africa at the Berlin conference. This division eliminated or overrode most existing forms of African autonomy and self-governance by creating arbitrary boundaries with a total disregard of the communities that already occupied these lands.

RV: I would like to go back to another reference you brought up in our conversations, that of Ursula le Guin's carrier basket, the first technology humans invented, a container as means to gather, to hold, to care for and carry, to sustain, to share. This is a big question to ask, and I am interested in singular answers. From your point of view, do you think a museum is a carrier basket? And what needs to happen to fulfil that role?

JK: I do think a museum is a carrier basket. The earliest cultural invention must have been a container to hold gathered products such as seeds. These carriers grew in their capacity to hold more objects and stories and thus became houses, museums and places of culture. As for fulfilling that role, Ursula remarks about how the first cultural device might probably have been a recipient. The way I interpret a recipient is to mean an entity that receives something, such as a gift or message while acting as the intended receiver or destination for what is given. To be a destination for something is what connects the spatial-temporal element of the museum to its curatorial responsibility, where great care must be taken in how we regard and reframe the museum across time.

RV: Lastly, are there any observations, objects, or other discoveries that stayed with you in the last couple of weeks, that you would like to continue to work on further?

JK: There are a few objects that have stayed with me but of note is the instrument with the moons of Jupiter. The model depicted at Teylers museum shows how Jupiter's moons circle this super-planet. Attached to the instrument is a black tube, through which all the moons can rotate. This is the shadow of Jupiter itself and it shows exactly where the sunlight does not come from. This constructed marvel excited me and got me wondering how one gives form to a shadow. Largely however, magnitude as a way of describing or thinking about the immense size and extent of something has stayed with me. Thinking about the weight of the universe and the attempts made to measure it while also dividing and occupying lived territories describes a lot of the feelings I felt when I was confronted by the sheer scale of the museum.