

Help Mr Nothing With Something

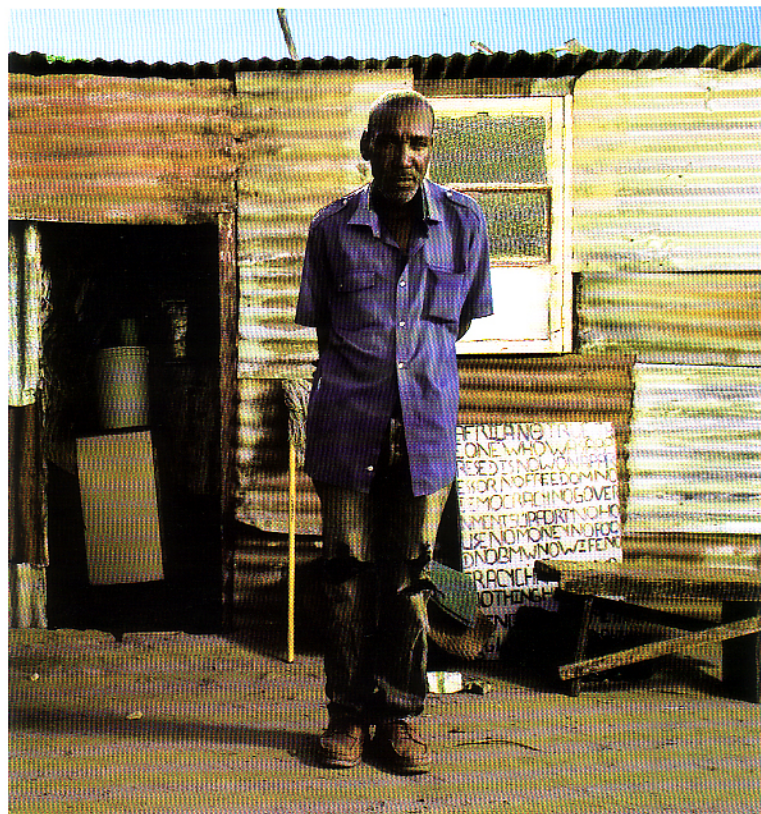
*Responding to a call for proposals from Cascoland, a festival of urbanism, Roger Jardine, Niall McNulty and Tamlyn Young devised **Along the Way**, a book chronicling the lives of ten Durban residents. Here we meet Moses Nxumalo, a street poet based on the corner of Musgrave and Berea Roads*

Moses Fano Nxumalo stands on the pavement holding his sign – as he has for the past 17 years – waiting for an impatient driver to take the time to read his message, to make a connection, to hand over some coins. At a glance Nxumalo's sign looks unintelligible; they are in fact full of meaning. Written without spacing between the words, his signs require effort. In this effort is the connection that Nxumalo seeks. In Julia Park in Johannesburg, where Nxumalo first started his work, he had a large piece of cardboard – as tall as himself and wide as cupboard – on which he wrote his life story in Zulu. Since then the card has shrunk but it is still the only medium he uses.

"I am only writing on the card, this is the only place I write," explains Nxumalo. "I started to write this story in 1992 when my wife decided to leave me (NO WIFE). I wrote this story because I was hungry and had no place to stay. I am telling the world I'm very poor."

Nxumalo writes his poetry in Zulu. His son translates and inscribes the message onto card. Each sign they make is different. One example simply repeated the word "NO" *ad infinitum*. Long-time collaborator, experimental architect and artist Doung Anwar Jahangeer feels that Nxumalo's use of the word "NO" is not a negative statement. Jahangeer elaborates: "The Zulu version of what he means by 'NO' doesn't mean, I don't have anything, but rather, I don't have everything. There is a subtle difference in translation and I think this indicates a certain pride. He is not begging because he is desperate, even though he is poor, but because this is his livelihood."

Nxumalo's story adapts and evolves



over time. He responds to his audience, the environment, even the changing political landscape. For example, the numbers at the bottom of his sign are a combination of the numerals 7, 6 and 8. Through using these numbers, auspicious to the Islamic faith, Nxumalo hopes that the Muslim residents of Musgrave Road would feel included in his performance. Jahangeer has also noticed an evolution in Nxumalo's message. "Over the years we have been collaborating, we have had discussions about the notions of the status of the poor, and I think this has set a dialogue in place. This political awareness has seeped into his writing." "This story is changing with me, it is growing with me," agrees Nxumalo. "First I was telling the story of my life, now it is the story of this country, of the comrades oppressing the poor people." Adds the tireless street poet: "I have more stories to write. I am going to write them."

Moses Nxumalo outside his home in Durban. Photo Roger Jardine facing page. Yinka Shonibare, MBE, *La Méduse*, 2008, wood, foam, plexiglas, Dutch wax-printed fabric, and acrylic paint, 210 x 167 x 137cm. Courtesy artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York