

Unsettling the Canon

Some thoughts on the design of *Visual Century: South African Art in Context*

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In his influential book, *Do South African's Exist?* Ivor Chipkin¹ questions the possibility of a cohesive South African nation. Given our traumatic colonial and apartheid past and the occult instability (to use Frantz Fanon's famous phrase)² of the African post-colony in general, Chipkin argues that a common *telos*, or a shared sense of unfolding, progressive time (ie: history as destiny), so vital to a sense of national identity, is practically unobtainable in this society that is radically divided along race, class and cultural lines. This begs the question: how do you write a history of South African art if South Africans (as a body of citizens with a semblance of unity) don't exist? Who do you pitch it to? Who do you get to write it? Which artists do you include/exclude? Whose version of history do you base it on? Other global epistemological questions are just as pertinent: why write broad national histories at all, given our disillusioned era's radical postmodern skepticism about the ideologically charged assumptions underlying both historiography and nationalism? Have critiques of History of Art as an atavistic, elitist and Eurocentric discipline that partakes of nationalism and its dangerous competitiveness not only rendered national art histories suspect, but positively redundant?

All these questions (and more) pertain to the *Visual Century* project, conceived by Gavin Jantjes in 2007 and finally published, in four volumes, in 2011 by Wits University Press. The endeavour was mammoth. Jantjes secured funding from then Minister of Arts and Culture, Pallo Jordan³ and selected Mario Pissarra as manager in August 2007. I was invited to help Jantjes and Pissarra develop a framework, which was submitted to a broad consultative process before four volume editors (Pissarra, Thembinkosi Goniwe, Jillian Carman and myself) were appointed. After years of blood, sweat and doubts, a box set of four weighty volumes, containing chapters by thirty-three writers, saw the light of day. In this article, I attempt to unravel some of the ethical and practical challenges and methodological questions that surrounded the undertaking from conception to finish.

In the blurb to its launch, *Visual Century* is described as a 'new' history of twentieth century South African art. This provides an important clue to the rationale behind the project: the very notion that a new history can be written, acknowledges that history-writing is a highly fallible process, and that what is commonly regarded as History (neatly wrapped and sanctified by its capitalisation) is at worst a questionable and skewed narrative, at best a

¹ Ivor Chipkin, *Do South Africans Exist?: Nationalism, democracy and the identity of 'the people,'* Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2007.

² See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Trans. Constance Farrington, Grove Press, New York, 1963, p 183.

³ Jantjes and Jordan became acquainted with one another as exiles during the Apartheid years.

partial and selective perspective. South African schools and universities (ideological state-apparatuses, in Althusserian terms⁴), are institutions of the nation-state and thus teach curricula based on the premise that something termed ‘South African art’ exists. As tenuous and socially constructed as the concept of a national art may be, it holds substantial currency in both educational and art-economic structures, with the result that these institutions, for want of something better, employ whichever histories of South African art there may be on the library shelves – a dire state of affairs, as the following brief look at the history of national art histories in South Africa will make clear.

It stands to reason that any national art history is pressured to conform to the official, sanctioned version of historical events propagated by the contemporary nation-state. Successive canons of ‘South African art’ reveal the extent to which dominant contextual discourses – both local and global – shaped the corpus of ‘the best’ art South Africa had to offer. Given that South Africa only became a putatively independent nation-state in 1910, books about South African art (as a national phenomenon) first appeared only in the 1930s, in the run-up to the fateful whites-only election that would see the triumph of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party that heralded institutional apartheid. If the metropole was, by then, reluctantly conceding that African material culture could possibly be termed ‘art’ (under the influence of its own emerging modernist primitivists), no such concessions existed in the recently independent settler colony. In fact, in the first few decades of the twentieth century, even local white artists were largely deemed unworthy of consideration, and galleries and museums collected and displayed mainly British and European artists. Until the late 1940s, (with the exception of the *British Empire Exhibition* of 1936, which included John Koenakeefe Mohl), international exhibitions showcasing South African art included no black artists.

Local art exhibitions often implemented segregated categories – the *Artists of Fame and Promise* exhibitions in the sixties and seventies, for instance, gave effect to the policy of apartheid by including a separate category for ‘non-white artists.’⁵

The earliest texts on South African art excluded black artists altogether – as evinced by the title of a 1953 publication on a white sculptor that would be hilarious if it was not so shockingly oblivious: ‘Anton Anreith, Africa’s First Sculptor.’ Until the 1960s, these texts were mainly in Afrikaans and were at least partly motivated by the Afrikaner nationalist struggle for cultural recognition, and hence focused predominantly on Afrikaner artists. Examples of such publications are *Kuns in Suid-Afrika* (1935), *Skone Kunste in Suid-Afrika* (1951) and *Ons Kuns/Our Art* (1959 and 1961).⁶ AC Bouman’s and Petrus Johannes Nienaber’s texts include no black artists, and *Ons Kuns* included in its first edition only

⁴ See Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus,’ *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2001.

⁵ According to Jo Thorpe the first non-racial art exhibition in South Africa (*Art South Africa Today*) was held in 1963 under the auspices of the South African Institute of Race Relations: ‘...up to this point in South Africa’s art history, [separate] exhibitions and competitions had been held for “Bantu, Indian and Coloured” artists’ (Jo Thorpe, *The Development of African Art and Craft, particularly in Natal/KwaZulu as seen by the Durban African Arts Centre – 1959 to 1989: A workbook*. Unpublished Manuscript, 1988, p 2.)

⁶ AC Bouman, *Kuns in Suid-Afrika*, Haum, Cape Town, 1935; Petrus Johannes Nienaber, *Skone Kunste in Suid-Afrika*, Johannesburg, 1951; South African Broadcasting Corporation, South Africa Association for the Advancement of Knowledge and Culture, Foundation for Education, Science and Technology (South Africa) and the Foundation for the Creative Arts. *Ons Kuns/Our Art*, Lantern in collaboration with SABC, Pretoria, 1959 and 1961. Multiple editions of *Ons Kuns* were produced, but quite few were left undated. The exact dates of publication are therefore difficult to establish.

Gerard Sekoto. Later editions also included Sydney Kumalo. An English-language 'national survey,' compiled by H Jeppe (1963) includes brief discussions of four black artists.⁷ Anna Susanna Jacoba Hattingh's book *Kunswaardering* (1964), which was prescribed in schools throughout the apartheid years, provides a linear history of Western artistic development, and has a final chapter on South Africa under the heading 'Eie Suid-Afrikaanse Kuns' ('Own South African Art') which, with the exception of white, English speaker, Irma Stern, includes only white Afrikaans artists.⁸

This exclusive conception of a national South African identity accurately mirrored the concurrent political disenfranchisement of South Africa's black populations. As the possessive title of one of these national art publications: '*Ons Kuns/Our Art*' suggests, the black populations (I include 'coloured' and people of Indian descent in this term) were simply not deemed part of the national body. Alexander's *Art in South Africa Since 1900*,⁹ for instance, has a subcategory titled 'The African and the Bushman' where mention is made of African art traditions merely in so far as they influenced white artists.¹⁰ The first attempt to assimilate modern black artists in the canon of a national South African art, was Esmé Berman's general reference book, *Art and Artists of South Africa* (first published in 1971, republished and enlarged in 1983), which included discussion of the Polly Street and the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Rorke's Drift) art and crafts centres¹¹ and incorporated a few entries on individual black artists.¹²

Modern black artists were not incorporated in any of the art history university curricula before the late 1970s, with the result that research on contemporary black South African art was conducted largely by anthropologists and government departments such as the Department of Information and the Department of Native Affairs. The 'native question' increasingly came to be regarded as the 'native problem' in need of a comprehensive 'solution' as independent South Africa came to define itself as a modern nation state.¹³ By the same token art history, as a discipline expressly concerned with the definition and containment of national identities, concerned itself with black art production not as part of South Africa's national art, but as an alien body posing taxonomic and hermeneutic problems to the definitive characterisation of a national South African art. The result was a separate corpus of literatures, largely anthropological in origin, for 'black art,' traditional *and* modern.

The anthropology promoted by the Afrikaans-language universities supported an essentialist understanding of cultures as self-sustaining wholes and relied on the tradition of the ethnographic monograph that treated 'tribal' groups as static traditional entities, while

⁷ H Jeppe, *SA Artists 1900-62*, Afrikaanse Pers Boekhandel, Johannesburg, 1963.

⁸ Anna Susanna Jacoba Hattingh, *Kunswaardering*, Voortrekkerpers, Johannesburg, 1964.

⁹ FL Alexander, *Art in South Africa/Kuns in Suid-Afrika: Skilderkuns, Beeldhouwerk en Grafiek sedert 1900*, A.A. Balkema, Kaapstad, 1962.

¹⁰ This perception was probably exacerbated by the common misconception that Southern Africa, unlike East, West and Central Africa, had no artistic traditions of note. Southern African traditional material culture, which featured relatively little in the line of free-standing sculpture but incorporated a wealth of finely wrought functional objects, was relegated to the inferior category of craft and unfavourably compared with the cultural products of Central and West Africa. It was therefore commonplace to regard the Southern African 'tribes' as proficient in music and the oral arts, but as deficient in material culture.

¹¹ These two centres were established (by missionaries in the case of Rorke's Drift in rural Natal and by white liberals in the case of Polly Street in Johannesburg) to provide art education and other cultural activities to local black populations.

¹² Esmé Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, A.A. Balkema, Cape Town, 1970 and 1983.

¹³ Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995.

anthropologists from (generally more liberal) English-language universities tended to be more concerned with the social dimensions of ethnic groups, and by and large eschewed the Romantic and conservative ethos of culturalism in favour of a consideration of the social functions of culture. Neither the English medium nor the Afrikaans medium universities, however, adequately accounted for change and intercultural contact. It was only as rapid urbanisation became a serious social and political issue in the sixties, according to David Hammond-Tooke, that South African anthropologists started treating change and the rural-urban continuum as an important dimension of anthropology.¹⁴ Significantly the first serious and sustained academic attempts to discuss modern black artistic developments occurred during this same period.

The most prolific and intensive researcher in the field (the best known and most frequently quoted writer during the apartheid years) – EJ de Jager of the University of Fort Hare – started publishing in the seventies.¹⁵ His writings reflect his training at an Afrikaans university in volkekunde¹⁶ and may be deemed representative of an anthropological outlook that endorses the notion of cultural (and by implication racial) essences. De Jager's writings undoubtedly exercised the most pervasive influence on subsequent publications on the topic – which can be summarised as a tendency to reduce the multiplicity and complexity of practices among contemporary black artists to one naïve attempt by 'The Black Artist' to deal with the confusing interface between static primitive traditions and an alien modern life-world. The tendency to view 'black art' as a collective phenomenon also meant that very few monographs were published on black artists before the late eighties.

To add to this discursive and institutional obliteration of artists of colour, South African art history (following trends in England, Europe and America) remained caught in a formalist paradigm for most of the twentieth century, which effectively isolated it from interdisciplinary debates about race and culture and which also resulted in 'histories' that radically decontextualised South African art. With the transition to full democracy post 1994, the situation remained desperate – although post-apartheid school and university curricula had been revised to accommodate an inclusive South African art history, few acceptable published sources existed for teaching purposes. Despite a healthy proliferation of fresh and challenging research on the contemporary South African cultural sphere, there had been no concerted effort to coordinate and compile recent, revisionist research on historical art, or to commission much needed new research on seriously neglected areas. While good and useful research was being published on select aspects of formerly overlooked areas of South African art, these publications were often too inaccessible or specialised, too few and far between, to be of value to educators.

¹⁴ David Hammond Tooke, *Imperfect Interpreters: South Africa's Anthropologists, 1920-1990*, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1997, p 150. This corresponds with international developments in anthropological writing – Herskovits' and Bascom's *Continuity and Change in African Cultures* appeared in 1962.

¹⁵ His *Contemporary African Art in South Africa* (1973) remained the only monograph on the topic until the late eighties. De Jager was an anthropologist by training and head of African studies at the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape, which was – until the establishment of the homeland universities in the seventies – the only university for black African students in South Africa (the University of Durban-Westville in Natal catered to 'Indian' students and the University of the Western Cape for 'coloured' students). He published numerous articles and two books on a variety of modern black artists and established South Africa's largest collection of modern black art at the University of Fort Hare. The anthropologist's last monograph on the topic, *Images of Man*, emerged in 1992.

¹⁶ Volkekunde was a brand of culturalist anthropology practiced and taught at most Afrikaans medium Universities.

The first step in trying to devise a structure for the new history, was to engage in broad consultations with academics, art activists, museum curators and gallerists. Needless to say these public engagements were chaotic and heated, and often resulted in deadlocks rather than forward momentum. In this sense, the birth of *Visual Century* uncannily echoed the difficult birth of the 'new South Africa' more than a decade earlier. While these consultations did not necessarily provide the concrete suggestions we were looking for, nor the degree of participation we'd hoped for, they certainly highlighted the difficulties of the task ahead of us. Most participants were excited about the project, but expressed unease about the encompassing scale and potentially sweeping nature of such a 100 year 'survey.' Would a new historical chronology of twentieth century South African art practice not simply overwrite previous exclusive and elitist accounts with a new master narrative? Won't a chronology necessarily impose a linear, unfolding teleology (what Walter Benjamin called 'messianic time'¹⁷) on the chaotic contingencies and conflicts of the turbulent South African twentieth century? Valid concerns were also raised about the overwhelming whiteness of the extant corpus of available writers – a hangover of decades of white academic privilege and a situation very difficult to remedy, given the paucity of black students who enrol for a perceived 'elitist rarity' like art history. This issue proved the most difficult to overcome, as I will elaborate on in the conclusion of this article. Also at issue was the question of inclusions and exclusions. Given that extant research materials such as archives and prior publications were always-already skewed by structural white dominance, how could we hope to remedy this ingrained discursive bias in the time it would take to conceive and execute the project? Which sources could we draw on to significantly readjust the focus of this history?

Another point of contention was how to approach women artists, who were arguably also the victims of structural and discursive bias throughout the twentieth century.¹⁸ The decision was taken to raise gender as and when it arose in relation to the themes isolated for each period, but to avoid gender specific essays that ran the risk of treating historical women artists as a tributary of the main stream, with all the essentialist implications such corraling entails. It was also felt that a number of excellent publications had dealt with the particular situation of women artists in South Africa and that it was unnecessary to repeat this research in the *Visual Century* volumes.¹⁹ It is interesting (and perhaps a telling reflection of the largely white female constitution of South Africa's art historical community) that the major critiques levelled at the *Visual Century* project to date, concerns the perceived absence of articles with an expressly feminist orientation.²⁰

Although it was not always evident at the time, these consultations and debates contributed significantly to the way the project was finally framed. The vexing question of chronology, in particular, took much strategic planning. Once it was agreed that the entire century should

¹⁷ See Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History,' *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

¹⁸ It is worth noting that white women artists always have featured prominently in the South African canon. It can be argued, however, that this prominence speaks of the low status and value afforded the visual arts in colonial and apartheid South Africa.

¹⁹ See Marion Arnold, *Women and Art in South Africa*, David Philip, Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1996 and 2005; *Between Union and Liberation: Women artists in South Africa 1910-1994*, Eds. Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmammann, Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, Hampshire, UK, 2005; and Brenda Schmammann, *Through the Looking Glass: Representations of self by South African women artists*, David Krut Publishing, Johannesburg, 2004.

²⁰ See Marion Arnold's and Karen von Veh's respective reviews of volumes one and three in *De Arte*, 86, 2012, pp 77-80 and 73-74.

ideally not be covered in one, sweeping narrative, it was agreed that the publication would appear in four volumes, each dealing with approximately three decades. But this raised fresh concerns: how could we avoid a potentially undesirable consequence of such periodisation, namely the insidious suggestion that convenient and absolute sets of historical boundaries frame distinctive successive 'periods' of national artistic 'evolution'? The conundrum of categorisation (and of language in general) presented itself in all its stark consequences: the privileging of identity over difference; the reduction of complex contingency to historical necessity. How, for instance, to avoid representing a neatly bracketed 'apartheid era,' with the 1948 Nationalist party victory as an absolute watershed bookmarking it on the one end, and the 1976 Soweto upheavals – the rise of populist black resistance and the beginnings of the 'struggle era' – representing the other watershed bookmark? The answer we came up with was to overlap the successive periods, so that no absolute periodisation would signpost South African art history for easy consumption. Thus volume two, which I edited, starts with the end of the Second World War (1945), while volume one (edited by Jillian Carmen) ends later, with the Nationalist party victory of 1948. In this way, coterminous concerns (such as the rise and development of Afrikaner cultural nationalism) could be dealt with in both volumes, but in ways that reflect the very particular complexities of and differences between the contexts of the respective periods in question.

Another strategy for overcoming the glib linearity of chronology was to divide each volume into eight separate, specialist essays. Thus a topographical approach, which deals with the particular concerns and themes pertinent to each historical period, could be combined with historical chronology. Each editor was allowed to frame thematic suggestions for their particular volume, which was then opened to debate and modification. This strategy also allowed us to draw on areas of specialist expertise and to open the project to a wide range of writers. Academic elitism was avoided by also approaching arts activists, journalists and other arts practitioners to contribute. These writers often offered fresh perspectives and pioneering research on selected areas.

Since one of the most important goals of the project, as its sub-title suggests, was to situate twentieth century South African art in socio-political context so as to correct the radical decontextualisation of most earlier South African art writing, the themes were largely designed to meet this demand. Context, however, is no simple matter. Jacques Derrida emphasises the importance of context in any reading of a text – with con-text being in itself a set of texts that occur in a complex inter-textual relationship to that which is read or interpreted.²¹ Jonathan Culler describes Derrida's cautious, two-pronged approach to history as follows: 'Deconstruction couples a philosophical critique of history and historical understanding with the specification that discourse is historical and meaning historically determined, both in principle and in practice.'²² Derrida distrusts the narrative ordering and sequencing that characterises the 'historical approach' in which History is invoked as ultimate reality and source of truth, but he continually asserts the historicity of discourses and emphasises the specificity of their particular contexts in order to undermine their transcendentalism.

²¹ See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' *Limited Inc*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL, 1988.

²² Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and criticism after structuralism*, Routledge, London, 1998, p 129.

But while Derrida talks of the need to consider contextual/historical frame as partly determining the force of language, he stresses the impossibility of exhaustively specifying contextual determinants. Culler expresses the uncontainable and unmasterable nature of context as follows: ‘Meaning is context bound, but context is boundless,’²³ or, in Derrida’s words: ‘No meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation.’²⁴ Thus any given context is always open to further description, and it is virtually impossible to determine with any certainty which contextual factors are more important and which less so: context emerges as itself a text (or a multitude of intertextualities) which has to be interpreted, and in which marginal or supplementary aspects may again point towards excluded or suppressed alterities.

One way to address this inevitable selectiveness of context, is to produce what the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, describes as a ‘thick description,’ or what Foucault would describe as ‘history as contingency.’ Collect as much contextual information (micro-historical data) as you can on the phenomenon in question, starting from its immediate surrounds, and then ripple out from there to wider macro-historical contexts, and then wider still, with the circles gradually widening and flattening out until they disappear. Thus it was agreed that, depending of the nature of the theme in question, local contexts would, as far as possible, themselves be contextualised within the broader African and international frames. To give an example from my volume: while the immediate context of art produced in South Africa during the decades of the fifties, sixties and seventies reveals the overwhelming importance of internal race-based South African practices, the broader African context, which had a profound impact on the discursive, political and cultural climate of South Africa at the time, saw the decolonisation of Africa after the Second World War, the concurrent rise of Black Consciousness locally and in America, and the threat these posed to South African white supremacy. Impacting, in turn, on this continental context, was the macro-political, global context of the Cold War, which not only profoundly influenced political events on the continent and in South Africa, but also shaped the ideologies, lives and practices of our artists.

As an example of this historical method, I will briefly discuss ‘my’ book (volume two, on the years 1945 – 1976), for which I commissioned essays that I hoped would provide a comprehensive account of the enormous variety of artistic practices and cultural discourses of the period. Since Afrikaner nationalism provided the dominant cultural, anthropological and political discourses that shaped the cultural policies of government, I commissioned an article from Federico Freschi on Afrikaner nationalist art, in which he demonstrates how the successful affirmative action policies and consequent upward mobility of the Afrikaner elite shifted nationalist art from the parochial sentimentality and crude propaganda of the thirties to an increasingly urbane modernist outlook that would reflect the status and cosmopolitanism of a new breed of powerful, wealthy rulers. In this way, the previous canon is framed within the shifting political context of Afrikaner nationalist identification. Contrary to existing hagiographies on the prominent Afrikaner artists of this period, Freschi’s wry and sometimes humorous account of the hubristic projects funded by the Apartheid state firmly situates the canonical artists of this period in their appropriate discursive and institutional context.

²³ Ibid. pp 122-123.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, ‘Living On. Borderlines,’ Trans. James Hulbert, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Continuum, New York, 1979, p 81.

With the official socio-political frame of apartheid era art covered in the first essay, the second theme, written by investigative journalist Hazel Friedman, offers a bird's-eye view of the ideological occlusions and contradictions of the period in question. Tackling the baffling apoliticism of most art produced during these politically fraught years, Friedman demonstrates the complex relationship between the social, intellectual and political spheres as manifested in diverse artistic practices. South African mainstream artists' rather oedipal dependence on the Western art scene is explored in this acute analysis of the apparent indifference of the majority of artists to pressing South African exigencies. Yet Friedman cautions that this period was, in fact, 'distinguished by a vast plurality of artistic practices and dialects,' and that 'works which most forcefully broke from the modernist assumptions of the 1960s were directly attuned to the shift of oppositional political consciousness that occurred, in about 1968, with the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement and New Left thinking in South Africa.'

In the third essay, Elizabeth Rankin explores the role that arts centres and workshops played in decentring the dominant white canon. This focus on alternative institutional praxis not only reveals arts centres 'as significant players in a culture of resistance,' but also offers a critique of the shortcomings of Bantu Education and the Apartheid state's utter neglect of the cultural aspirations of the majority black population. Rankin historically traces the establishment of arts centres across Africa and reveals the immense influence they exerted on the emergence of an African modernism, but also acknowledges the unique socio-political function and features of South African arts centres and workshops. Covering not only well known centres such as Polly Street and Rorke's Drift, Rankin conducted substantial primary research on lesser known centres such as Durban's Bantu, Indian and Coloured Arts Group (BICA). While contemporary African art critics such as Olu Oguibe have quite justly criticised African arts centres for perpetuating white, liberal patronage of black artists, Rankin's essay explores the extent to which these largely white, liberal initiatives engendered a sense of common purpose and community among artists of colour that produced a strong current of cultural resistance to the white art establishment that heralded the arts centres of the seventies, eighties and nineties.

My essay, the next in the volume, covers the discursive reception of black artists' work in the white owned media and in art historical publications and government-sponsored journals. This deconstruction of the art – and anthropological discourses that framed modern 'black' art as a curiosity and anomaly, was deemed essential to this volume, primarily because it serves to unpack problems inherent to the overwhelming majority of extant texts on black artists works still referenced by scholars today. In addition, it reveals the virulently Eurocentric academic and intellectual climate of the period, by emphasising the influence that conservative anthropological theories and essentialist Art Historical beliefs exerted on South African art criticism.

This is followed by Sandra Klopper's essay on the tradition-modernity dialectic as manifested in the cultural products of migrant labourers. Departing from a strict art historical emphasis on High or Fine arts, Klopper adopts a visual studies approach to describe examples of the complex interface between traditionalist cultural practices and modern materials and iconographies. I commissioned this theme because the migrant labourer's experiences represent the lived reality of the majority of the country's population during the decades concerned. The negotiation of rapid socio-political change via shifting and hybrid cultural

practices characterizes this period of South African cultural history more, perhaps, than the High Art practices of the suburbs – the more conventional material of Art Historical inquiry.

Essay number six, is Christine Eyene's article on artists in exile. The dismissive and overly-racialised white reception of black artists' work (as discussed in my essay) and the increasingly more repressive climate of the country at the time, resulted in a significant outflow of artists to the artistic centres of Europe and America. The mostly traumatic experiences of these exiled artists – who often encountered similar discriminatory practices in their countries of exile – is explored to reveal a rich complexity and variety of artistic practices and political responses.

Anitra Nettleton next explores primitivism in the arts of this period in chapter seven, and compares South African primitivism with its European counterparts. She also notes that the practice had different resonances for black artists of this generation than for white artists. As was the case for numerous modern artists from the newly independent African colonies, a nascent nationalism underlay the excavation of African traditions for South Africa's black artists; while for white artists, 'the primitive' constituted a quintessentially modernist means of accessing the unconscious and challenging normative social and sexual taboos.

The final chapter of this volume, Hayden Proud's essay on Formalism, uncovers the complexities of South African artists' relations to the European and American art capitals during this period. The conservative collection practices of the major South African art museums in the first half of the twentieth century delayed patronage of a local modernist tradition, and once such a tradition took root, much of it consisted, inevitably, of weak derivations of its Western counterparts. Yet, despite the isolation that was their lot, numerous artists managed to respond to the issues, causes and debates of the wider art world, and some even managed to further their studies in Europe, the United Kingdom and America, introducing South African institutions on their return to the latest trends in the West. As in most of the Western world and Commonwealth countries, formalism and abstraction became modernist orthodoxies in South African art schools in the late 1950s and 1960s, and generations of (white) artists who studied at these schools assimilated the theories of the early formalists such as Roger Fry, and later Clement Greenberg's more doctrinal approach to abstraction.

The above outline of volume two shows how chronology (a serial account) was combined with topography (a thematic account), but mainly serves to demonstrate how important context was to not only the selection of themes, but also the selection of artists we looked at. This means that our writers did not necessarily look to include the 'best' South African artists, but rather focused on art that resonated most interestingly with the unique and complex environment of South Africa, Africa and the world. Mediocre artists, who, for instance, were incorporated into a particular canon for occluded politico-cultural reasons, might be discussed with the intention to clarify their success with reference to the context in question.

But, even with this encompassing understanding of context in mind, no one volume could hope to provide a panoramic picture of the complex international arena of the twentieth century. It was therefore decided to include a time-line in each volume, in which events deemed significant to African and international artistic and political processes could be listed. With the aid of assistants, Pissarra undertook the mammoth task of compiling and editing these time-lines, which include four columns: South African history, South African art history, world art history and world history. The South African history time-line includes

cultural events (the publication of seminal literatures, the formation of cultural organisations, musical highlights etc.) as well as mainstream historical events such as (to take the random example of 1966) the assassination of Verwoerd and the (historically underplayed) stripping of the citizenship of forty-six nationals in exile. The world history and art history timelines avoid an excessively Eurocentric focus by including reference to events such as the formation of art movements or associations in places as far apart as Korea, Algeria and Cuba, and events such as Turkey joining NATO and the nationalisation of the Iranian oil industry – historical incidences that, at first glance, may not seem particularly important to students of South African art, but that prove to be prophetic and significant for the development of our contemporary geopolitical environment. This decentring of historical, political and cultural history allows readers to get a bird's eye view of the complex rhizomatic network of connections, conflicts and influences in the globalised arena of the colonial and post-colonial world. Realising that such an ambitious attempt to cast the eye very wide inevitably leaves the project open for criticism for omissions, we hope that future editions of the book-set, and an as yet unrealised open-access internet site for the ongoing expansion of the *Visual Century* project, will see the timelines fleshed out more.

Unlike previous revisionary endeavours of the late eighties and nineties,²⁵ which aimed to highlight the glaring omissions of the South African art world of the apartheid era, *Visual Century* is not only about casting presences from the absences of dominant art history, but also aims to account for previous canons – to acknowledge them, but in such a way that the contingencies surrounding their production is exposed and accounted for.

To do this, *Visual Century* adopted, to my mind at least, a Foucauldian approach: the project rested on the understanding that canons are discursively produced; that knowledge produces power and that power produces knowledge; and that the knowledges produced about art in this country during the twentieth century were simultaneously produced by, and productive of, the dominant power relations that contaminated every aspect of the South African life-world.

To produce a 'new' history is therefore perforce to interrogate prior historical accounts. It is impossible to look at the art of South Africa as a historical phenomenon without also addressing the forces – ideological, institutional, socio-political and discursive – that both interpreted and influenced the production of art in this country. This means the *Visual Century* project was tasked not only with re-writing South Africa's history of art, but also addressing the institutional and discursive mechanisms that produced a very selective, elitist and racially-skewed canon of South African art during the twentieth century. Hence a strong focus on museums, university practices, informal arts centres, collections and public art programmes.

It is generally agreed that Art History plays a vital role in the construction of a national canon of art – it is a discipline that is closely imbricated with the Nation State, as a visit to any of the major European art museums, which are still largely organised around national

²⁵ A revisionist process was launched by two exhibitions: Caroline Cuvillier (of the Pretoria branch of the Alliance Française) curated *Historical Perspectives of Black Art in South Africa* in 1986 and University of South Africa academic, Steven Sack, curated the Johannesburg Art Gallery's *Neglected Tradition* in 1988. These two exhibitions (the latter much more comprehensively) attempted chronological histories of modern black South African art that sought to redress its historical exclusion and marginalisation from the national South African canon.

canons, should make clear.²⁶ This potential side effect of broad national histories is something that we were painfully aware of throughout the design and implementation of the project. It is hoped, however, that the critical stance adopted towards canon-formation in *Visual Century* as a whole, will caution the reader to recognise the extent to which these four books are also products of a particular context and time.

As mentioned earlier, a vexing aspect of this time- and context- specificity is that there is still a lamentable paucity of black art historians whose skills and insights can be drawn on for such an undertaking. While there is a substantial increase in the number of black students qualifying as fine artists, the same is not true of art history, for reasons that can at best be speculated on²⁷. *Visual Century*'s contributors are thus still largely white, particularly as far as specialisation in the more remote historical periods is concerned (volumes one and two). I could locate only one potential Black South African writer in the period covered in volume two, who unfortunately had to decline my invitation because he was engaged in another publication at the time.²⁸ The small up-and-coming generation of black art historians tends to focus largely on the contemporary sphere; hence there is greater representation in volumes three and four. Perhaps this dearth of black art historians speaks more eloquently of the immense white cultural capital obtained through centuries of systematic racism than any argument or fact presented in the collected articles of this four-volume publication.

²⁶ The reason for this lies in the development of Art History as a discipline in late nineteenth century Europe. Closely identified with global European cultural, economic and military dominance and with the historical consolidation of the Nation State, art history developed to determine a competitive canon of 'the best' European art and to confirm Art as a Western phenomenon and prerogative. It served to trace not only a progressive development of major European artists and styles – a linear history of teleological development – but also to establish art as signifier of Western national characteristics and cultural superiority.

²⁷ In *The Luggage is Still Labelled* (2002/3), a documentary about the racial imbalances of the South African artworld since 1994, Julie McGee and Vuyile Cameron Vuyiya interview professional black visual arts practitioners about this state of affairs, and most comment about the structural inequalities of South Africa's art departments and art establishment. Another determining factor, to my mind not sufficiently explored, could be that art history is not perceived as a good career option as far as employability is concerned.

²⁸ Professor Chabani Manganye published excellent research on the artist Gerard Sekoto and on the writer Es'kia Mhpahlele.