The Globalisation of Apartheid
Representing Power

Biko Agozino

‘New Art from South Africa’ bore witness to the concern shared by many analysts that, rather than having come to an end, apartheid, as a system of crime against humanity, is being globalised in various ways. This was implicit in the strong presence of political motifs in this exhibition, not only about the representation of politics but also the politics of representation. The works could be classified according to whether they warned that apartheid has not completely disappeared from the world in which democracy is still narrowly defined; they dwelt on the dynamics of apartheid in our private lives as racialised, class-specific, gendered beings; or whether they simply pointed out the dangers lurking from a past that still haunts a liberated present.

Into the third category fell the suggestively titled mixed media piece, Transition (1995), by Willie Bester. A ridiculously toish ‘AK47’ lamely pointed accusingly towards a chain of real bullets linked to a more sophisticated double-barrelled machine-gun with a masked white face and an AWB badge painted on the butt. This served as a disturbing introduction to this rainbow-coloured work in which the ANC colours were absent except as so many dots and splashes. Inset between the guns were rusty iron chains from which was suspended a crude wooden frame of oil painting on sack cloth, featuring a black mother with her child behind whom hovered a fire-spitting helicopter dubbed ‘Mr No Body’. Three passport-sized photographs of dead black boys were directly above the head of the surviving child captioned ‘15 years?’, ‘100 years?’, ‘3 years?’ It did not seem to matter as the centenary of a dead child ominously warns of an uncertain future in a world still callous about human life.

In the middle of Transition, horns and skulls of wildlife suggested that fascistic power not only threatens human life. Beside the dead wildlife, however, the hope of freedom was represented by a breached wire net from which three white metallic doves of peace flew off to the top left with blood-stained beaks and bodies. The leading dove had its beak stuck to the bottom of one of the many multi-coloured and randomly numbered metal cups that formed a line at the top and bottom of the work. The suggestion was that the cups were completely empty of thirst-quenching liquid, hence all three doves were headed for that one cup from which the leader was drinking.

Another sackcloth painting to the left-hand side of Transition displayed more photographs of dead children with lingering doubts about their ages. In the same painting, a factory chimney spews black smoke while a child drinks from a public tap with his eyes focused on rows of coffins. Nearby, two dismembered hands display empty shells of bullets as if bearing witness at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Near the bottom of Transition there lay very crude musical instruments and broken footwear, perhaps celebrating the very limited freedom that the people of South Africa have so far won.

This installation essay was the only work by Best in the exhibition; and probably because of its disturbing contents and strategic display at the entrance to the exhibition it made compelling viewing. As any piece of art, many equally valid interpretations were possible, but read as a commentary on the transition from apartheid to majority rule in South Africa, it was, perhaps, too pessimistic, like a transition to nothing, a transition to the past, or one that perpetuates the end that it heralds. Perhaps, the transition from apartheid was not seen as promising in 1995 and so the work reflected a mood at that time; or, perhaps the artist was only concerned with documenting what the transition is or should be leaving behind, so that popular memory would not forget the urgency of progress. In any case, Transition demonstrated the inadequacy of painted essays or painted history except when seen alongside written and oral history.

David Koloane’s environmentally concerned works were also on the theme of dangers in store. The Power Station, 1996, acrylic on canvas, shows gigantic chimneys belching thick smoke while three dogs feast on rubbish in the street. An overcrowded car drives to the right-hand side, leaving two solitary television screens yards from the unmindful dogs, suggesting, perhaps, that power corrupts just as the power station pollutes.

Similarly, Koloane’s The Moon and the Dog (1997) returns to the symbolism of the dog as a powerful character with little morality. Here it is green-eyed (with envy?) and pink-mouthed (with greed?), while the moon is hardly visible, possibly eclipsed like the dark windows of the rows of houses, with the exception of one which is orange
bright. All hope is not lost, perhaps: the painting *Waking Morning* (1996) depicts two dogs squaring up to each other completely oblivious either to the cars zooming past like an army of insects, or the multitude of people passing, all set against rays of sunlight, as if promising the dawning of a new day.

In the same category of warnings about the dangers lurking in the present past, fell the paintings of Sandle Zulu. The youngest of the group of exhibited artists, Zulu was represented by *Artomism One* and *Artomism Two* (1966), works made with soot, fire stones and water on canvas. From a distance, the soot patches painted a mass of blots that looked like microscopic cells. The separation of the white from the less prominent black patches suggested the currency of divisive racial thinking, where the white is still unmistakably the privileged group, and yet the unity between black and white in the same network of shapes promised the complementarity that is possible in a harmonious coexistence.

In *Frontline with Target*, the political symbolism is more overt even though the work remains abstract. Here, spear-like bamboos are wrapped with soot-covered fabric with ends like horses' tails. Set in the middle of two long rows of spears, the target is a concentric circle made of saw-dust-like grass glued to canvas that is itself fired and soot-stained. Ironically, the spears are all pointing away from the target. On the whole, Zulu's pieces seemed to be more optimistic about the transition from apartheid than the *Transition of Bester* or the environmental catastrophism of Koloane.

On the theme of the politics of the personal, Alfred Thoba was exemplary with his deceptively simple but deeply textured paintings. In 1993, he produced the apparently misogynistic *Women are not Elegant* made with oil on paper. Here, a man is dressed formally from chest down to only his underpants. He seems about to enter a limousine in front of which a miniature naked woman is sculpted bending with her buttocks sticking out towards the driver. Behind the limo stands a topless woman who is pulling her trousers down as if to attract the attention of the departing man, and in front stand two women who appear to be competing as they raise their dresses to flash their naked vaginas at him. Since Thoba is an openly political artist (who painted the 1976 *Riots* published in *Resistance Arts* in South Africa), one could argue that, at a superficial level, this apparent misogyny indicates that even resistance artists do not escape gender discrimination in their work. However, at a more political level, the work could be said to be an ironic commentary on the stupidity of patriarchal masculinity which sees nothing in women except sex and pornography. In *Trees of Eden*, a man is shown trying to pluck a woman from the treetop as if she was just a fruit left there by God on the day of creation specifically for the satisfaction of his lust. On all the branches of the tree, other couples are copulating in the typical missionary position, with
the exception of one standing couple engaged in fore-play. Here Thoba seemed to be challenging his fellow men to look beyond sex in their interaction with women, that gender inequality should not be seen simply as the ordinance of God, that women have made various contributions to the struggle for freedom and the building of democracy.

If this reading is too sympathetic, then Thoba's painting, *Still Life with a Bachelor* (1996), convincingly demonstrates the inverted meaning that is the currency of irony. Here, a transparent blue bowl of grapes sits on a grey table with three cherries. On the coat hanger beside the table is a lady's gown. Below the table, two lady's shoes lie apart from each other, one pointing downwards and the other pointing to the right. The pink chair at the table is vacant. The rest is left to the imagination and I imagine that Thoba is warning about the fate of bachelors if they continue to treat women simply as items for consumption.

Similarly, on the politics of the personal, or more correctly, about personalities in politics, was the series of collaborative drawings by William Kentridge, Robert Hodgson and Deborah Bell, which set out to update and reinterpret Alfred Jarry's 19th century play, *Ubu Roi*, predicting the arrival of dictators like Hitler. In a statement accompanying the drawings, Kentridge announces, "I think there is Ubu in all of us. Indeed since his conception, Ubu has become a familiar historical figure, an agonisingly intimate Everyman. He has been variously, Nero, Hitler, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein and the corporate fat cat..."

That is an overstatement if ever there was one.

Alfred Thoba, *Trees of Eden*, oil on paper.
Collection: Standard Bank Collection of African Art at the University of Witwatersrand Art Galleries
These dictators were not 'Everyman' in any sense of the word and to say that there is a bit of Hitler in everyone sounds a bit like Nazi apologism. In the context of apartheid, this suggestion is not convincing unless one believes that the victims sinned as much as they were sinned against. The fact that some of the liberation fighters have admitted 'making mistakes' does not justify accusing the whole of humanity of harbouring fascist genocidal instincts: there is a lot of difference between apartheid and anti-apartheid supporters. Over-generalising statements like these bring out clearly the dangers of globalising apartheid, leading to the feeling that perhaps the Nazis and apartheid fascists were just normal human beings or that those who fought against oppression are as guilty as those who perpetrated it.

This danger of globalising, or normalising, apartheid emerged more clearly in the drawings of Deborah Bell where Ubu assumed an exclusively black African appearance, depicted as an African dictator with the features of people from Central Africa. This was nothing but the very well known 'orientalist' tendency which presupposes that the barbaric Ubu is simply the black people of Africa, a supposition that pro-apartheid ideologues pushed quite openly as an argument against black majority rule in South Africa, and contrary to the well-documented history of the struggle by black Africans against oppressors whether they were white, yellow, black or brown. Once again, this type of ahistorical globalisation of apartheid is very misleading, to say the least.

Robert Hodgins’s *Ubu centenaire histoire d’un farceur criminel* was the clearest representation of the Ubu phenomenon from a historical perspective. He portrayed Ubu-like characters in history without suggesting that they were normal people just like everyone else. However, the point being made by the Ubu artists was well taken: there is no basis for the classification of human beings into the normal and the pathological given that one act might appear heroic to some and diabolical to others depending on which side of the fence they are. This is similar to the labelling perspective in criminology according to which deviance, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. However, the crimes of apartheid, Nazism, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the genocide in Rwanda etc., cannot be said to depend on the eye of the beholder. These were evil acts that justified all the struggles to bring them to an end. The warning of Ubu is that they could happen again if we are not vigilant and if we fail to deepen democratic structures that would guarantee human rights everywhere.

On that note, we arrived finally at the first category of works in the exhibition — the danger of defining democracy too narrowly and thereby missing the point that apartheid could continue by other means even after it has been laid to rest at a formal level. On this theme, Durant Sihali’s
Breakthrough Into Democracy Series, using handmadepaper, departed from the conventional definition of democracy as people-centred and tried to highlight other attributes of democracy that can only be ignored at peril. Sihali emphasised that the questions of equal access to language, economy, mineral wealth, land and agriculture are key elements of the breakthrough into democracy in South Africa.

To drive this view home, Patrick Mautloa's painting Transit (1995), showed a two-way traffic sign below which an X marked the double presence of 'no entry' and the act of voting, whilst a tiny door or window at the bottom right was barred like a prison. The work read rather like a minimalist version of Bester's Transition. Overall, the mood of 'New Arts From South Africa' seemed to be that of understandable caution towards the future.

'New Art From South Africa' was at the Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, from 10 October to 8 November 1997.

Yoko Ono
Have You Seen the Horizon Lately?

Angela Dimitrakaki

What could a Yoko Ono survey show be like? This is not the question that the Yoko Ono exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford aimed to answer. Instead, the show invited you to share the impression of an elaborate and purposeful inconclusiveness. And in this respect it can be said that the show was quite successful since it preserved a sense of openness, though not necessarily the same kind of openness that characterised the artistic experiments of the sixties — and nowhere was this more obvious than in the films selected to be among the highlights of this presentation. Films like Bottoms of 1966 (employing the image as a methodological tool) do nothing to bring down from its pedestal the Decade of Mythical Demands — this is how the sixties have registered in the disturbed stratification of postmodern consciousness. Which makes it all the more difficult to read a film like this two years before the end of the century, as if time has turned the original text into an authorised translation in which something is lost. Films like this are perpetually haunted by the original intentions leading to their conception and the original response of their first audience. They recast the meaning of ephemerality by making you wish you were there when the film was still a political and aesthetic process, as if the film itself (the finished product that can circulate from one institutional site to another in 1998) is merely the documentation of an event sealed in a different temporality. By this I do not mean at all that it looks dated. On the contrary, in the current climate of regulated and marketable shock value, it is difficult to believe that this film has already been made. The problem is that it has.

What is the fate of artistic experiments? This is one of the most important questions to emerge from the array of signs in the Yoko Ono show. And that question is posed in the most dramatic fashion since the viewer was constantly reminded that whatever has been categorised as conceptual art did in fact exist: it was daring, provocative, funny, volatile and yet of substance, constantly negating and redefining the cutting edge of