... to represent someone or... something has become an endeavour as complex and as problematic as an asymptote, with consequences for certainty and decideability as fraught with difficulties as can be imagined. [In addition] the notion the colonised... presents its own brand of volatility... [And to be colonised] is potentially to be a great many different, but inferior, things, in many different places, at many different times.¹

Edward W. Said

VISIONS

Impossibly overshadowing colonialism, the apartheid vision has ensured that even to speak about cultural others — let alone speak for them — is to risk reproducing its repressive regimes. In writing here I cannot represent other voices, but if I do it is only by default.

Given an apartheid vision we might also speak of an apartheid gaze. Like other gazes it colonises. It regulates meaning; it interrogates, maims and murders. While race monopolises this gaze, it incorporates other exploitative visions — like classism, sexism and ethnic prejudice. It will survive the laws that bolster it and outlive our generation. Colluding with other oppressive visions in Western ocularcentrism² — this gaze reveals the naked eye of Western scopophilia. Spotted with blindness, it produces its own field of ‘discriminations’. While totalitarian, the apartheid gaze is not total. Its culture spawns a counter-culture. Its pseudo-traditions are confronted by ‘other’ traditions. In facing down apartheid culture the culture of resistance has often only been able to glance at a more imaginative future out of the corner of its eye. It has had little choice. Its struggle has mostly
Jane Alexander *Butcher Boys* 1986

Paul Stopforth *Biko I* 1986
been to create conditions for creativity. It has seldom created those conditions itself. The challenge now is how to begin to realise what has only been glimpsed through fissures in the finally failing white nationalist hegemony. This process has begun. While the cultural struggle continues across a broad front, its terms appear to be shifting: shifting from the demands of combat to those of self-definition, from strategies of boycott and confrontation to those of critical engagement. Some fleeting (and non-mystifying!) signs of this have been noticeable since the early eighties, perhaps even before, although these have been frail and difficult to sustain.

Albie Sachs’ recent plea, from within and to the broad liberation movement, for cultural openness and critical introspection signals this shift. Speaking to a Swedish audience not long ago, he had this to say:

You [Swedes] know who you are. Perhaps your artists have to explore underneath all your certainties, dig away at false consciousness. We South Africans fight against real consciousness, apartheid consciousness, we know what we struggle against... But we don’t know who we ourselves are. What does it mean to be a South African? The artists, more than anyone, can help us discover ourselves.

For Sachs culture and identity interweave; ‘“Culture is a very deep thing. It’s about who we are. It’s what we mean when we say we are South Africans.”’

NATIONALISM?

An obvious dynamic in this (re)constructing of selves and others is nationalism. Notions of nation-building permeate cultural rhetoric across time and the political spectrum: from Mangaliso (Robert) Sobukwe’s pan africanism to the African National Congress’ (ANC) humanistic cultural pluralism, from F.W. de Klerk’s ‘new’ South Africa to Andries Treurnicht’s ‘old’ South Africa. All in one place at one time.

It is hardly surprising that uncomfortably similar rhetoric sometimes articulates the cultural visions of those otherwise in radical and even violent opposition. For example, the tag ‘unity in diversity’ we find in a recent article in Mayibuye (the journal of the ANC) — titled ‘Culture: the Antidote to Apartheid’ — recalls the self-same slogan of the controversial Republic Festival of 1981. At that time the Apartheid state’s cultural celebration of its hegemony was heavily contested by those only now beginning to emerge from its long shadow.

Both the struggle for liberation and the maintenance of the status quo is often cast in terms of nationalism. Ethnicity, like nationalism, clearly involves achieving political goals — getting and keeping power, mobilising a following “through the idioms of cultural commonness and difference.” Tribal constructs play a powerful part in both. The Apartheid vision of white Afrikaner nationalism has segregated ethnic groups ‘self-
determining’ into nationhood. African nationalism has flatly challenged this.

Ploughing the waves of sea is probably easier than finding common ground in conflicting nationalism within South Africa. Powerful, if imaginary, ‘nationhood’ often betokens wishful thinking. As E.J. Hobsbawm observes:

... where ideologies are in conflict, the appeal to the imagined community of the nation appears to have defeated all challengers. What else but the solidarity of an imaginary ‘us’ against the symbolic ‘them’ would have launched Argentina and Britain into a crazy war for some South Atlantic bog and rough pasture?12

Hobsbawm’s characterisation of nationalist movements of the late twentieth century as ‘essentially negative’, ‘divisive’ or ‘defensive reactions’13 may relate more to the disintegrating Apartheid State than the South Africa to be. Does nationalism provide useful leverage in the process of cultural democratisation? Is there a South African nation at all?14 Currently South Africa does not have an integrated border. If we did, it would still be the one drawn in by colonialism. Within our borders the material and symbolic conditions for open exchange between black and white are effectively absent. We still know little about each other beyond the narrow roles history has cast for us. How is all this registered in visual imagery?

NARRATING HISTORY: HISTORIOGRAPHY

The path to knowing the South African past, like the present, divides and multiplies.15 Historiography is itself a present site of struggle.16 As V.Y. Mudimbe has it, history is legend ‘an invention of the present.’17

Historiography doubtless plays a role at many levels in the construction of a South African cultural identity. Going the way of available historical narratives we find a discordant clash of voices; indigenous, settler, liberal, British, Afrikaans, radical. Some are patently nationalist, some not. Predictably it is only white Afrikaans nationalist historiography which has extruded a tight fitting graphic imagery. Quintessential here are the works of artist W.H. Coetzer, perhaps most programmatically codified in his illustrated
Peoples' Park, 'Comrades Centre', Mamelodi Township, 1985
Photo: G. Jaffe

Joachin Schonfeldt The New Patriotism 1990
book *My Kwas Vertal* (My Brush Tells). In it Coetzer pictures the chosen, the unchosen (other 'groups'), and their conflicts. And, in our land of myths, Coetzer charts that most heavily mythologised and significant of themes — the land itself.

For the rest ideology and image indulge in more diffuse and eccentric relations. For instance, British settler visions of the land encoded in landscape painting may be less ideological advertant but they still bear the colonial imprimatur. I will return to this later.

That the dynamic between visual image and historiography works in the other direction — images as a (re)source for historiography is beginning to be recognised. This partly relates to a changing notion of what stands for admissible evidence in the court of history. Luli Callinicos, in her introduction to the catalogue for a recent exhibition titled *Art and the Media* notes:

> Until very recently, the only historical evidence that scholars took seriously was the written word. Partly responsible for this was the monopoly that European culture held for centuries over the production of printed documents. In Europe and its colonies, it was more likely that the deeds and utterances of the rich and powerful would be immortalised in official documents, newspapers and parliamentary proceedings. The lives, struggles and opinions of ordinary men and women — often illiterate — were for the most part officially ignored if not suppressed. Reconstructions of the past in the form of popular memory, oral testimony, story telling or graphic art were held to be unreliable because they were facile or fanciful. What was overlooked was that the printed evidence can be as biased as a conversation — perspectives differ according to one's position in society. 

**LEGENDARY HISTORY: IN THE BEGINNING?**

Beginnings are stressed in narrating, not least historical storytelling. An emphatic statement about origins betrays a desire to control history.

‘Traditional Africa’ for Public Consumption
When history begins is crucial. The idea that San rock art is 'prehistoric' projects it beyond (before or outside) 'our' history. From here a familiar plot ensues, a plot which sets the holy alliance of history — culture — civilisation against the calamitous combination of prehistory — nature — primitive. This plot manufactures identities and otherness as suspect as they are endemic to Western culture. The plot thickens in the representation of African culture cheek by jowl with dinosaurs in a museal ambience of Natural History, as opposed to Cultural History, the privileged domain reserved for white settler cultures.

Colonial Grahamstown was a frontier town. It still is. Currently the site of a major national cultural festival, it was here that Barbara Masekela made one the first significant cultural interventions for the African National Congress after its unbanning. In this town's Natural History Museum we find a section titled 'People's from Africa'. This is (naturally)
reserved for black people. (In my childhood black people were often called naturelle [naturals] in Afrikaans). A simulated cave houses a number of recessed displays. One is headed ‘Rock Paintings — pictures from prehistoric times’. All are within a stone’s throw of the dinosaur exhibit — Bradysaurus Baini et al.

Moving on we find this barefaced proposition in the ‘South Africa 1700…’ display:

When the Dutch arrived in Table Bay, it marked the end of the prehistoric period and the beginning of history in our country.

Copied cruelly in white paint on an otherwise largely vacant map are two almost recognisable ‘rock paintings’ — a gesture to the presence of these ‘makers’ of history, white settlers. For more of these makers we are forced to leave the realm of Natural History and relocate to the 1820 Settlers Memorial Museum next door. This story is told over and over again in the museums of the Western world.

Colonialism took and kept black people out of history. It was, after all, that great European Hegel who said ‘Africa has no History’. For poet, critic and current head of the ANC’s Department of Arts and Culture (DAC), Mongane (Wally) Serote:

We have [as a people] been denied our right to make culture and history as free people. Yet, as we struggle against oppression, and as we defend and fight for freedom, so we enter history, and as human beings we redefine and create culture.

The return of the oppressed has now taken place with a vengeance. Serote is precise about dates; for him the 1987 CASA Conference in Amsterdam marks the people’s return to history. In 1991 this return is irreversible. The struggle continues.

FISSURES: SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

Very much present identity, tradition (history) and representation collided forcefully in a recent photographic exhibition held at the Market Gallery in downtown Johannesburg. Organised by the respected journal Staffrider, the exhibition was opened by the then head of the DAC of the ANC, Barbara Masekela. The photographer in question was Steven Hilton-Barber.

The exhibition generated a widely reported controversy. Deep feelings were aroused, finding their most open expression in the angry, pained comments in the visitors book. Some 47 employees of the Market Complex, including well-known actor/director John Kani, signed a petition headed by this statement:

We . . . hereby state our objection to the exhibition of photographs of the initiation ceremony of African males. We see it as an invasion of a sacred African tradition, which has for centuries been private. We demand the removal of these photographs from public view.

Adding insult to injury these images appeared in a mass-circulation Sunday news magazine, under the rather predictable rubric ‘rites of passage’. This publication coincided with the opening. The display was closed when the photographs were stolen. The controversy was debated in a public panel discussion held at the Market Theatre on 12 December 1990. The following were some of the main issues raised.

Violating cultural privacy: the photographs were held to be an invasive record of a ritual held sacred by a living community. This is not a simple matter. Steven Hilton-Barber stated that permission to photograph the ceremony was granted by the principal of the school, on condition that I had been circumcised. This was the only condition attached to my access to the ceremony . . . Both the initiates and the elders were aware of my presence and my purpose.

Vusi Ngidi, spokesperson for the workers, suggested that the broad community structures, like the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa should have been consulted. (Re)representing ‘others’ as barbaric, insensate, objects: this objectification is common in photographic practice, one which crosses another powerful but dubious Western cultural tradition already mentioned, namely representing the contemporary ‘other’ as specimen — primitive, timeless (ahistorical, before our time, at any rate), and exotic.

Asserting Tribal identity: this was especially
 Steven Hilton-Barber Rites of Passage,
taken from Sunday magazine cover by the author with permission
problematic given the public, metropolitan setting. As such the exhibition was considered misplaced and ill-timed given the broad political climate. Tribalism has often been an historically divisive force in the general quest for (black) national unity. According to Ngidi:

We are in a political crisis of transition, the pictures encourage tribalism. The social-minded artist should not work with tribalist images for now, it may be relevant, but the time is not right. Maybe in 10 or 20 years..."

Double standards on nudity: this involved questions of pornography, sexism and racial mockery. The show was said to exploit racist attitudes towards nakedness. Noteworthy here is the fact that showing bare-breasted ‘traditional’ women on post-cards is still widespread in South Africa. The same cannot be said for white women. Or, for that matter, as one report pointed out, white boys undergoing initiation at an Afrikaans University."

All these points open onto deeper, more intractable questions; who ultimately holds the rights to cultural material, its appropriation, representation and dissemination? This particular form of production and publication (art exhibition) begs questions of broader cultural practices. The appropriation and display of imagery from any source — living or dead — is now a naturalised routine of a good deal of Western artistic behaviour. This routine — the symptom of a sort of vicarious vitalism — is itself one of the beloved spectacles of international postmodernism. The assumed rootlessness of cultural signs motivates postmodern celebrations of every shade.

Steven Hilton-Barber Rites of Passage,
taken from Sunday magazine by the author with permission
The casualty here is historical specificity and all this might mean. The value to South African artists and cultural workers of modelling local cultural practices on international postmodernists feeding off the image-bloated corpse of their own and ‘other’ cultures is debatable. Moreover addiction to absolute freedom of expression suggests that anything may be pictured and published. In South Africa this ‘freedom’ is, as elsewhere, largely conditioned by the needs of the dominant order. While infringing on the right of a culture to self-protection, the rights of an arguably naive if well-intentioned, well-placed individual — ‘I have attempted to act with integrity and with a sense of responsibility and sincerity’ — to picture whatever s/he considers worthwhile are upheld.

Turning on questions of censorship and freedom of expression, this continues a heated debate in the larger cultural domain. Editor of Staffrider, Andries Olifant, considers the controversy as evidence of “a society where much still remains to be done before freedom of expression and the right to criticism become common values.”

FRAMED?

Which evaluative frameworks legitimately apply here? Can the different implied frameworks be reconciled? The photographer insisted that he was “a documentary photographer and not a cultural anthropologist.” In asserting that the work be assessed on its quality as photography — “the standard of my photography” — the photographer seems to privilege an autonomous aesthetic realm over all others. Other criteria might be derived elsewhere, not least politically conscious ethnographic practice.

However, the photographer is also at pains to institute another dimension of value — that of the document:

It was my concern that this ritual should be documented, not only to add to the growing photographic cultural heritage of our country, but to help educate, enlighten and broaden understanding of different cultural practices.

The photographs thus constitute evidence, facts appropriate to the historical record. Aesthetic contemplation (as commonly understood) is not only rarely called for here, for it may undercut the documentary status of the work. I am reminded of Walter Benjamin’s comment about Atget’s photographs of the depopulated streets of Paris, which become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them.

Hilton-Barber insists on this function; “My photographs are a factual documentation of a particular cultural practice and I attempted to record this ritual as accurately as possible.” Interpretation of this ‘factual’ record apparently involves “the question of perception” not of the photographer, but of others. The contextual implications, ethical or otherwise, are seemingly outside the concern of the photographer.

Speaking of “allowing the situation to speak for itself” or referring to the “photographs themselves”, or “factual documentation”, Steven Hilton-Barber appears to hold that the act of photographing is somehow value-free. Further, that photographs give unmediated access to the reality they purport to show. If true this seriously misunderstands and underestimates the power of context and the admittedly complex question of mediation. It is a power in which judgement and choice is unavoidable. Hilton-Barber himself acknowledges that one “of the most enduring problems faced by documentary photographers is that of the distance between themselves and their subjects.”

This distance — and the judgement it necessarily occasions — is foregrounded when we consider this statement made by the photographer in the public debate:

I attempted to document a basically authoritarian [my emphasis] situation in a way that would allow the situation to speak for itself.

Value-judgement is clearly implied by the stressed words. It is perhaps understandable that just these two words were dropped from the phrase when the piece was published in Staffrider.

This implied transparency and value freedom
— both in terms of documentary ‘facts’ (photographic evidence) and the absolute autonomy and exclusive relevance of ‘aesthetic’ criteria (good photography) — face the challenge of the actual power relations that structure the larger social domain in South Africa. An ethnological point of view may make this political dimension clearer. We might, for example, consider an exhibition at the Peabody Museum, Harvard University held in 1986, _From Site to Sight: Anthropology, Photography, and the Power of the Image_, which addressed, sometimes rather tentatively, this and related issues. There Melissa Banta and Curtis Hinsley argue that:

Intimacy always carries with it the burden of respect and responsibility..., and photographic intimacy, which involves the special exposure of human lives, adds a special need for sensitivity.48

This ‘exposure’ is played out in the image-text relation in interesting ways. It is noteworthy that the captions — which might be said to anchor and direct the meaning of the image49 — shifted given the context of display. In the initial context — the exhibition — the trivialisation of deeply felt private cultural practices appears to have stemmed from an implied equation of art as entertainment. In this the public art gallery is felt to be the space of light relief, of escape, of quick sensation. This perception would have been strengthened by the _Sunday_ Magazine article, the second context. Such magazines divert on a dull day. As indicated already, the photographer’s response to the controversy — in ‘good photographic faith’ — was later published, with images, in _Staffrider_. This constitutes a third context, arguably the most sober. Some textual shifts between these different contexts are
worth noting.
In the exhibition one figure was captioned ‘The initiates eating pap and maroga (porridge and spinach).’ In the Sunday Magazine this caption was included within the image field with the addition of ‘They must ‘close the anus’ while eating.’ When reproduced in Staffrider (after the controversy erupted) the caption is reduced to ‘Eating’. We might ponder the reasons for these shifts.

Striking, too, in the published apologia is the dropping of three images which show frontal nudity, including the image on the Sunday Magazine cover. These, with the editing out of the patently value-laden words mentioned above, suggest increased consciousness of the power inscribed in photographic practice.

We might take special heed of Banta and Hinsley’s words in a chapter — aptly titled ‘The eyes that look back at us’ (aptly recalling the image on the Sunday Magazine cover):

In a fragile, politically splintered world, we need to see each other clearly...photography yields more power than ever before and carries heavier ethical burdens. Because the ethical issues are not inherent in the technology itself but derive from its uses, the impact of photography depends less on the camera than on the person standing behind it.

In their original publication and exhibition these photographs were clearly felt by the workers to be a form of symbolic violence. Loaded pictures, they represent ‘tribe’ as wildlife — fair game for the dominant culture. This species of cultural trophy-hunting is a familiar cultural pastime in the neocolonies.

LOOK AGAIN

Looking at ‘others’ also informed a recent
Ethnic Map of South Africa (detail)
project by Cape Town artist Sue Williamson. Part of Williamson’s intention, like Hilton-Barber’s, was to record. Here the object is itself a record of sorts:

For thirty years, next to his heart is a record of every page of Ncithakalo John Ngeli’s passbook, issued to him on 29th October, 1955, and carried in the inside pocket of his jacket every single day until the day in 1990 when he gave it to me.\textsuperscript{52}

Here socially constructed identity — a named person identified by a dompas (passbook) — and history fuse differently. Whatever its particular difficulties this seems a more considered and politically visible approach. Williamson:

It’s gone now, part of our recent historical past. Future generations may find it difficult to comprehend the power the passbook had over the lives of black South Africans, but that power was complete. No passbook, no rights... [This work documents] the record of one man’s life, as prescribed by the State...\textsuperscript{53}

Williamson also installed metal trunks in the gallery, trunks migrant workers use to store and transport their earthly possessions. Here the artist wished to develop the “idea of baggage which has to be carried through life,

Sue Williamson For Thirty Years Next to His Heart 1990
Installation view.
Sue Williamson  *For Thirty Years Next to His Heart* 1990 (detail)

Sue Williamson  *For Thirty Years Next to His Heart* 1990 (detail)
and loads, and identifying labels and time passing, and journeys.  

This work points to the changing relations between lived history and visual art which have begun to mark both historiography and visual culture in South Africa in new ways. The graphic dimension of History now motivates critiques arising from within the dominant discourses. History Painting proper and popular (mis)representations are in fact answering ‘other’ emerging historical narratives. This work usually seeks a more self-critical relation to the politics of representation and the representation of politics. Some artists do this by simple juxtaposition of terms in cultural shorthand, while others invoke a rather more searching look.

In her *Exhibit: Ex Africa* (1991) Penny Siopis collages and overpaints ‘generic’ history pictures culled from various sources, including history text-books, the images “We were brought up on... stereotyped images of colonised and colonisers. Our textbook stories were illustrated by them, and we copied them for our history projects.”  

Buried in and interleaved between these layers of ‘copied’ repeated representations are identifiable historical figures — some well-known, some not. Perhaps most trenchant are the representations of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called ‘Hottentot Venus’. For a time (1810-1991?) Saartjie Baartman’s abused body became the screen for a spectacular compound of pseudo-scientific and popular projections —
blends of bitter racial and gender prejudice. Her body, her story, is paradigmatic of the scopic savagery of Western looking at ‘others’. Hers was a journey to the heart of ‘civil’ darkness, a cultured world.

In Exhibit: Ex Africa, half-innocent, half-covered (by an actual Victorian apron, object trouvée), the edenic ‘natural’ habitat of the likes of Saartjie Baartman is repeated ad nauseam, despoiled by cliche in an intolerable history. The apron recalls Saartjie’s ‘veil of shame’.57

(RE)VISIONS: LOOKING FURTHER

That history and visual culture are finding new relationships is the achievement of the broader struggle in and outside the country. There were significant cultural events outside South Africa in the 1980’s which amongst other things sought to shift and consolidate cultural power within the country.58 A revisionary impulse is now visible and voluble in South Africa, having first registered its presence in the dark days of the 1980s, the decade of emergency.59 The impulse finds expression in a wide variety of national cultural activities and events: exhibitions, art history conferences, publications, festivals, national art competitions. Many of these directly address the question of identity.
In 1987 a conference of the South African Association of Art Historians saw its task as addressing the issue of Re-writing the Art and Architectural History of Southern Africa. The number of books published on South African visual culture, ranging from the cultural work of the Khoisan to contemporary art, increases year by year. These publications are often avowedly revisionary, attempting to rewrite as well as fill the gaps in the already written. The number of comprehensive catalogues for major ‘revisionary’ exhibitions is also a manifestation of this tendency.

The modes of selecting and judging many of the major national competitions have also been challenged by progressive movements with varying degrees of success. These challenges address a broad range of issues, from including judges more representative of all the communities in South Africa, to deeper questions of values. Identity lies at the heart of many of these challenges.

**FUSION: HERE AND NOW**

Many of these exhibitions have been motivated by the need to achieve something ‘truly’ South African. For some this has been a relatively simple matter of extending the canonisation of names to include the appropriate quota of ‘others’ (blacks, women). For others a more radical structural alteration is necessary to give substance to concepts and relations more congenial to the emerging culture. Incidentally it would be wrong to assume that work produced by black and non-black artists was never ‘integrated’ in the sense of being seen together. The gone but not forgotten
immorality act left some forms of intercourse alone.

Naturally in order to interfere better elsewhere. In 1971, the then Minister of Health, Dr Carel de Wet insisted, "Contact across the colour line is welcome so long as the motive for contact is the greater separation of the races." 64

Interesting here was the Pretoria Art Museum's recent (20 June — 15 August, 1990), Looking at Our Own: Africa in the Art of Southern Africa, ('N Blik Op Die Eie: Afrika in Die Kuns Van Suider-Afrika). The dominant cultural categories are still 'groups' articulated in the language of apartheid. In this respect this 'pluralist' show proved to be more backward looking than looking back at history.

Most revisionary exhibitions have been mainstream events, well-documented and often lionized by artworld cognoscenti. Distinctly off-mainstream was a more modest exhibition in 1989, titled South African Mail Art — A View From the Inside, which engaged issues of race, class and gender identity. It also consciously identified itself with the liberation struggle inside and outside the country. 65 As it was to travel abroad this exhibition was organised within the terms of the selective cultural boycott. It was supported by the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid and received the support of many progressive cultural structures within the country.

The organisers invited women from town and countryside to submit a postcard communicating their experience of being in South Africa in 1989. Any form of expression by individuals or collectives was welcome. Some card-making workshops were organised

_South African Mail Art: A View From The Inside, 1989_
with community cultural workers, relatives of maximum security prisoners held at Robben Island and other prisons, children in the townships, nd women in the rural areas. All work received was exhibited. The only condition was the signing of an anti-apartheid pledge.

We reject apartheid in all its forms. We pledge to work for the formation of a free and democratic culture in South Africa. We recognise that such a culture can come into being only with the removal of all forms of economic, political, social and educational oppression, including all discrimination based on race, sex and age.

In many respects the exhibition echoed the British Feministo [sic] project of the late 1970s, emphasising communication, broad creative rights, the power of the collective.

Some important questions were aired during the process. Tensions between gender, race and class oppression inevitably surfaced. While recognising that the notion of ‘shared oppression’ (‘all women’) glosses over the specificities of the oppression of working class black women, solidarity across these boundaries was considered an important strategy by the organisers and many participants. Nevertheless the organisers did feel that uncritical imports of European or internationalist ideologies of gender oppression may result in its force being lost in the local setting — being either irrelevant or considered yet another form of neo-colonialism. Some critics saw separatism as sexist and questioned the value of a gender-specific exhibition against
BLACK WOMEN WORKERS NO LONGER BE ON
FREE ENTERPRISE IS WORKING IN S.A.!
THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES!

South African Mail Art: A View From The Inside, 1989
WELCOME TO SUNNY S.A.P.

BUY ONE BEFORE THEY GET YOU.....
BE PROTECTED FROM THE BLACK BARBARIANS
sexism? For the organisers the reality of gender-specific oppression called for gender-specific action, at least as a start. This facilitated solidarity and challenged that oppression.

Inevitably, questions of value were also raised. Were received notions of art and aesthetic value appropriate to local cultural expressions, for instance, 'peoples culture'? These questions involve debates about craft, available symbolic and material resources, primarily educational opportunities, access to equipment and facilities, and the state of usable, community-based visual traditions.

Such debates have boiled over into mainstream art events; for example, the already mentioned Grahamstown Festival of the Arts, held at the 1820 Settlers Monument, once called 'the English equivalent of the Voortrekkers monument' by Nadine Gordimer. Recently, Festival Young Artist awards have been made to two black women — Helen Mnakgoba Mmapula Sebidi, in 1989, and Bonnie Ntsalini Tshali (with Fee Halsted-Berning) in 1990.

Are these awards simply gestures, instances of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions against — viz, the putative centre welcoming 'selective inhabitants of the margin in order to better exclude the margin.'? Even amidst such questioning these awards are to some degree the fruit of critical interventions on the part of the excluded or marginalised majority. History (tradition) and identity figure prominently in Sebidi's work. She comments on her The Child's Mother Holds the Sharp Side of the Knife (Manguana Otshara Thipa Kabaleng):

I see a woman chained, pulling her tradition... In African tradition they say it is the woman who holds the sharp side of the knife. Here, woman is holding the knife in this way and is saying — this is what I have to do, and it's my way.

The imaginative effort here is to express the uncomfortably different identities of the rural and urban woman worker. Sebidi grew up in a rural environment and came to town as a domestic servant before taking up picture-making.

As already noted it was at Grahamstown that the ANC's Barbara Masekela made a controversial intervention last year. The strategic involvement of the sort Masekela engaged in remains a matter of continuing debate. Resisting co-option, risking legitimising exclusive cultural events parading as inclusive, while challenging and re-appropriating existing cultural forums and resources to advance democratic, free culture remains as one of the major challenges facing South African artist and cultural workers.

Clearly visual culture has a contribution to make in the coming phase of social reconstruction. From the point of view of the ANC the desired outcome of these interventions is 'a strong and proud South African identity'. A strong identity requires a sense of place.

LAND(E)SCAPE?

A lack of exactly this sense of place has probably always unsettled settler culture. This appears nowhere more evident then in attitudes to the land. Writer J.M. Coetzee argues that one persistent settler vision sees the land as 'vast, empty, silent
Helen Sebidi Where Is My Home — The Mischief of the Township 1988
[and]...unchanged'. This vision signals a failure, "a failure to imagine a peopled landscape, an inability to conceive a society in South Africa in which there is a place for the self... a failure of the historical imagination."  

Underpinning this vision are two different conceptions of wilderness (wilderness); one linked to British colonialism with its obsessions with the border between order and disorder, culture and barbarity, the other with Afrikaner isolationism, which saw land as refuge, the mythically privatised place of purge, purification and promise.  

Landscape painting, in the tradition of white nationalist mythology with its historical mystifications, has now largely degenerated into a sub-genre of designer cosmos. Coetzee's pressing question remains important; 'Is there a language in which the people of European identity, or if not European identity then of a highly problematical South African-Colonial identity, can speak to Africa and be spoken to by Africa?'  

Some white artists still try and deal with questions of land, place and identity. Indirect and allegorical, Clive van den Berg's Faustian images present idyll and purgatory in collision. Here unidentifiable earth is distended with promise as bad faith, with an unrepresentable history, all scourged and graced by metropolitan desires.  

More direct, and by association, is 'field painting' — abstract painting by black artists — which perhaps suggests a wholly different set of relationships. Most commonly experienced in a collective workshop format out of doors, this genre may point to a more relaxed, rooted and expanded sense of place. The major contemporary force here is the Thupelo Art Project, based in Johannesburg, whose aim, according to David Koloane 'is to create opportunities for genuine self exploration amongst artists.' The project's aesthetic and material roots lie in a rather strident, American oriented and supported high modernism refracted through local conditions. Amidst much (white) critical worrying about the historical relation between Abstract Expressionism, the Cold War and American imperialism in contemporary South Africa, some black artists have asserted their
right to paint in this tradition. Or, as they would have it, have this tradition work for them.

Koloane resists the criticisms of the practice, which for him suggest white prejudiced about black identity:

[Critics] would seem to propagate a view that the naive and somewhat crude ethnic identity of black artists has to be maintained regardless. Creative experience is not perceived by them as a long-term and varied process leading towards maturity. It is regarded, rather, as a quick-solve formula devised to establish an identity in the art market or even a political affinity.79

FUSION: OTHER TIMES, OTHER PLACES

This attempt to clear a place within immediate political pressures bespeaks another artcultural trend which attempts to shift focus from physical to metaphysical place. These are usually ‘synthetic’, eclectic, allegedly transcendental visions responding to a strong redemptive impulse which runs through South African visual culture. In promising deliverance from ‘politics’ most of these efforts require much aura-management and entrepreneurial skills on the part of promoters and their charges.

Here artists seek — with uneven results — to reveal or develop new (re)visionary places to speak from, new languages to speak with, a new identity.80 One of the more compelling of these is Jackson Hlungwani. Aggrey Klaaste, editor of the Sovietan newspaper, speaks of Hlungwani as

an elite, a mystic [who]... cannot be dismissed [but] should not simply be indulged. What meaning does he have in these testing times? He crosses many cultural barriers yet he has found a unique identity... Hlungwani reminds us of our essential humanity which is both unique and dynamic.81

For his part Hlungwani is explicit:

All the people in this country must become one nation,...I do my job to try to show people about a new world where we can be united.82

Identity figures prominently in one of the
Jackson Hlungwane with Cain 1985
very few books devoted to an individual black artist. Titled *Durant Sihlali: Discovering my True Identity,*\(^{83}\) the book catalogues the radical transformation of Durant Sihlali's work from 'socio-historical documentation' to 'the realm of self-exploration'.\(^{84}\) Travel, like exile, sharpens identity. Sihlali's journey to France in 1986, according to Koloane, proved to be 'not only a physical experience [but]... paradoxically also a journey to the interior of [his] ethnic origin conceived through visions of his tribal lore.'\(^{85}\) Koloane speaks of the 'potent ethnic presence' of these works. Historical irony also finds a place in this identity:

The large painting pieces... explore the paraphernalia of unorthodox objects collaged on the respective pieces. These include hollow riverbank reeds, a mirror disc, cut-away calabashes, tribal fighting sticks, a letter-carrying stick with a letter to President Botha attached to its forked end. These sticks were used to deliver their master's/mistress's letters by 'kaffir' messengers during the colonial era.\(^{86}\)

Sihlali himself refers to a psycho-history of dreams and premonitions as the well-spring of his art. In these works he responds to spiritual demands mediated through his ancestors;

All the while my contact with the *Idlozi* had found expression in my art. But I did not show these paintings to gallery owners. While I was being dictated to by ancestors the gallery owners were being governed by commercial whims and white people's perceptions of black art.\(^{87}\)

There is here a perhaps false opposition between what we might call political relevance and religious feeling. Relevance perhaps relates more or less to immediate political tensions. In some quarters the relatively unambiguous registering of these tensions in creative work has seemed a precondition of value.\(^{88}\) Religious feeling is often displaced or considered mystifying in this scenario. The historical moment of this sterile confrontation seems to be passing. The political question of relevance has been a source of irritation for some black artists. Against the demand 'that the artist's work should align itself with a certain cause or purpose, affecting his community', David Koloane insists that 

... creative expression is not determined or induced by events external to the demands of creative experience. Potential... can only develop via a journey of exploration and via other cultures, techniques and self-discovery.\(^{89}\)

This account clearly bears the mark of humanistic individualism and pluralism, primary strands of the dominant but not uncontested aesthetic ideology in contemporary South African visual art discourse.

*Durant Sihlali Pinwille Ruins 1974*
IDENTITY WITHIN AND WITHOUT HISTORY

The apartheid gaze has placed identity beyond context and history. Identity has been fixed by ‘nature’, backed by God. Every identity — worker, woman, African, Zulu, Afrikaner — is prefixed by a static ethno-nationalist category. This fixation has maimed and crippled our cultural life. The identity may be dynamic has been foreclosed. That people might choose different identities in different situations has been denied. The cruel economies of the apartheid vision have dissected identity, inflating it’s alienated fragments into a grotesque wholeness.

W. Beinart (according to John Sharp) showed that ‘people’s experience of ‘class’ or ‘nation’ is often mediated by, and reached through, the other ways in which they define themselves.’ However real, such changeability may not always be comforting. Identity, fixed or fluid, can be a matter of life and death in times of emergency. Recent conflicts in South Africa are tragic testimony of this.

CONCLUSION

The power of culture in South Africa lies in the vital bond between symbol and substance, the imagined and the material. Ideals mix with blood. It is a volatile power. The sanitizing aesthetic distance so characteristic of Western aesthetic discourse does not have, in the African sun, the easy life it might promise elsewhere.

The challenge for us is whether we can harvest this power according to needs other than the those of the interrogators’ room, the wounded crowd, the dusty backstreet, the isolated studio.

Our task is to uncover our history and recover our traditions. To straighten distortions, to make the negative positive. To do this with those who have been absent for so long — exiled, jailed, and marginalised. To do this in memory of those who cannot return.
NOTES


4. Ibid, p. 146.


11. On ethnicity and tribalism see ibid; and Vail (ed.),


13. Ibid, p 166.


16. According to Ken Smith ‘charges of presentism could... well be brought against all the schools of history discussed in this book.’ Ken Smith, Ibid, p 2.


22. John Yates, Manhire Royden, and Tony Parkington, Pictures from the Past: A History of the Interpretation of Rock Paintings and Engravings of...
23. Masekela's speech was reprinted in full as 'Culture in the New South Africa' in Contact, Vol 2, No 14, November 1990, pp. 4 - 16. An edited version, titled 'We Are Not Returning Empty-Handed' was published in Die Sud-Afrikaan, No 28, August 1990, pp 38 - 40.


29. Opening on Sunday, November 25 the show was originally set to end on January 18 (1991). The press release issued by the Market Galleries noted that 20 photographs were stolen on Friday night, 14 December between 22.30 and 01.00 hrs. The captions for the photographs were vandalized between 12.00 and 13.30 hrs on 17 December. The matter was reported to the police.

30. Steven Hilton — Barber presented a response titled 'In Good Photographic Faith'. An edited version of this was later published under the same title in Staffrider, Vol 9, No 3, pp 34-39. Unless otherwise stated I quote from the published version.

31. Market Panel Discussion, unpublished presentation, 12 December 1990, p 3. This was edited out of the published version, where only the simple statement — “I had permission to photograph the ceremony and publish the photographs” — remains. Ibid, p 38.

32. From a draft report by Jonathan Ress, Sapa, Johannesburg, 13 December.

33. Ibid.

34. See Andrea Vinassa, 'Inisiasiefoto's – Vrae Oor Etiek', Vrye Weekblad, Vrydag, 30 November, 1990, pp B1, B3.


37. 'In Good Photographic Faith', op cit.


42. Steven Hilton-Barber, 'In Good Photographic Faith', op cit, p 39.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid, p 38.


46. Ibid, p 36.

47. Ibid, p 38.


50. Hinsley and Banta, op cit, p 127.


52. Sue Williamson, 'Dompas' in Art and the Media, catalogue for exhibition held at the Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of the Witwatersrand, March 13 - April 12, 1991, p 43.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.


57. Interview with the artist.

58. Some major festivals of resistance were: Culture and Resistance, organised by the Medu Cultural Ensemble, Gaborone, July 1982, and The Cultural Voice of Resistance, Dutch and South African Artists Against
Apartheid, Amsterdam, December 1982. Culture in Another South Africa, the CASA Foundation and the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 14-19 December 1987. The Zabalaza festival held in London in July 1990 is the most recent event outside South Africa.


60. The conference was held in the Department of Fine Arts, University of Stellenbosch, 10-12 December.


62. These include the Cape Town Triennial (Rembrandt Van Rijn Art Foundation), The Vita Art Now Awards (A. A. Mutual Life), The Standard Bank National Drawing Competition (Standard Bank).

63. The major example here was the 1985 Tributaries exhibition, curated by Ricky Burnett and sponsored by BMW (South Africa). See catalogue, Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art, Quellen und Stromungen: Eine Astellung zeitgenössischer südfranzösischer Kunst. The work was shown in Johannesburg for a short time before trekking to Europe, primarily Germany and Austria. More recent was the Johannesburg Art Gallery’s, The Neglected Tradition: Toward a New History of South African Art (1930-1989), curated by Steven Sack. A third, unhappily not seen in South Africa, was the recent Art From South Africa show, curated by David Elliott, director of the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. See Art From South Africa, catalogue, Oxford, Museum of Modern Art, 1990. Distributed by Thames and Hudson.

64. Quoted in Ben Macleman, Apartheid: The Lighter Side, Plumstead and Cape Town, Chameleon Press in association with Carrefour, p 83.


66. Local exhibitions took place in the Joseph Sone Auditorium, Cape Town on January 11 and the Johannesburg Art Foundation on January 13. The work was exhibited abroad at the SOHO 20 Gallery, New York, from January 30 — February 17, where it formed part of the Women’s Caucus for Art, 1990 Conference, titled ‘Shifting Power’.

67. Penny Siopis, op cit, p 45.

68. See Staffrider, Vol 8, Nos 3 & 4, 1989, which is devoted to Worker Culture.

69. Penny Siopis, op cit, pp 48-49.

70. Barbara Masekela, op cit, pp 38 — 40.


78. Koloane’s position owes something to the somewhat Greenbergian modernism of the late Bill Ainslie, friend and mentor. See Avril Herber, in Conversations, Some People, Some Place, Some Time, South Africa, Johannesburg, Bateleur Press, 1979, pp 104-110.

79. David Koloane, op cit, p 84.


84. Ibid, p iii.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid, p iv.

87. Ibid, p vi.


89. Durant Sihlali, op cit, p iv.

Samson and Leah Beaver with baby Frances Louise ca. 1907
Photo credit: George Noble Collection, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Banff, Alberta.

Sam[pc]son Beaver and his Family. This lovely photograph of stoney Indian Sam[pc]son Beaver was taken by Mary Schaffer in 1906. She was a writer, naturalist, photographer and explorer who lived and worked in the Rockies for many years. Mary Schaffer is one of several notable women who visited the areas early in the century and fell captive to the charm of the mountain. — caption on contemporary postcard from Banff, Canada.