A Deadly Explosive on Her Tongue
White Artists/Black Bodies

Ruth Kerkham

1 Zora Neale Hurston, Moses, man of the mountain [c 1939], University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1984, p 326.


All of the above critics are working in a North American and/or European context while they write on South African art. The critic Colin Richards has produced some of the most significant work in South Africa itself. See for example his essay 'Retaining this Fire', Atlantica, no 11, October 1995. (I am not suggesting that critics who are male or who are not South African cannot make valuable contributions to this debate. My fear, however, is that these discussions are often monopolised by those in power. As such, I am merely attempting to open up the debate.)

Race consciousness is a deadly explosive on the tongues of men.

I have titled this article in a deliberately unequivocal manner, as a deadly explosive on one’s tongue leaves little room for intermediaries of any kind. If one were to spit the explosive out, it would surely blow up in one’s face, and if one were to swallow it, it would certainly shatter one’s being. It aptly describes, however, the South African debate regarding the representation of the black female body by white female artists, where certain inevitabilities are presumed. By playing on the gender specificity of this quote, I am also alluding to the fact that the most audible critics in this discussion are too often exclusively male.

Many South African artists, being ushered out of the dearth caused by cultural and economic sanctions, are exploring issues of identity, feminism and the body that have been present in European and North American art since the 1960s. However, in a perilous context where the effects of colonialism, racism and patriarchy lethargically linger, difficulties arise as a newfound, theoretical liberalism often exceeds the praxis. In response to the obdurate grip of patriarchy, some female South African artists have exuberantly explored issues of sexism in their work and have exposed the body, both black and white, in ways that subversively confront the society’s notoriously narrow sense of decency. However, these artists, who are predominantly white, often seem to ignore the fact that for black women in South Africa the need for gender equality drastically pales in the light of the need for racial equality. By drawing the black female body into their own agendas, these artists do, at times, co-opt black South African women, regardless of how genuine their acts of sisterhood might be.

The problem, nonetheless, does not end here, as the sometimes vitriolic criticism of this art by male critics such as Olu Oguibe andOkwui Enwezor has
successfully locked the debate into what Kadiatu Kanneh describes as, ‘The battle over the Black Third World woman’s body [that] is staged between First World feminists and Black Third World men.’

These distinctions between ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’ are of course extremely dubious, just as the categories ‘western’, ‘feminist’ and even ‘woman’ are homogenised oversimplifications. As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, this dichotomisation of identities rises partly out of a ‘Euro-American system of dualistic reasoning and its age-old divide-and-conquer tactics’. She argues that the ‘pitting of anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles against one another allows some vocal fighters to dismiss blatantly the existence of either racism or sexism within their line of action, as if oppression only comes in separate monolithic forms’.

In a South African context it is precisely such a pitting against each other of anti-racist and anti-sexist debates that has occurred and it has led to both camps launching heated attacks at one another. What has, unfortunately, been forgotten is the fact that both groups were initially searching for ways to deal with and respond to oppression, and what has resulted instead is an ugly, often self-serving monopolisation of the very oppression they set out to challenge. In this article I will discuss the works of a few South African artists as well as the criticism thereof, and will argue that both tend to simplistically perpetuate a dichotomy that inevitably translates into a deadly explosive being on our tongues. I will work towards a destabilisation of this dichotomy and will suggest that Trinh’s emphasis on necessary ambiguity is the only way to circumvent perfunctory hermeneutical responses that have limited consequence in the fight against injustice.

WEARING THE SKIN OF THE OTHER

The South African artists Minette Vári, Candice Breitz and Penny Siopis raise various questions regarding the issues of racism and sexism that are so embroiled in South Africa’s despicable past and that spill over into its injured present. What is significant about these artists is that each of them use their own bodies, as white women, as well as the representation of black women’s bodies in their works, and at times even wear the skin, so to speak, of the other women. As I shall argue, the trying on of identity and race in this context is more often than not problematic. However, the critical writing that I will refer to categorically dismisses this work rather than wheeling out the specific and intricate problems, and as such, it persistently maintains a dispute that lacks both sophistication and respect. In my reading of these three artists I will try to point out some pitfalls, many of which are unique to a South African context and that I have observed as a South African myself. I hope that through a dislodging of dichotomous readings of these works, South Africans will find a space to continue this debate. For, as we know from our own history, the monopolisation of ideas can only have treacherous results.

Minette Vári: Baudrillardian Semblance

Minette Vári claims to ‘undertake an analytical and ironic scrutiny of the way concepts of reality are created’. She runs ‘reality’ through her cyberpalette, suggesting that by cutting, interfacing and scratching its surface she is able to make very slight changes that reflect history itself. As Jean Baudrillard suggests, ‘History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth’, and he argues
that any appeal to a real history and to lived experience is merely a retroactive politics, a nostalgia for a lost referential. Vári plays with history in a Baudrillardian sense, holding it up to the light of social construction. The positive side to this is that such playfulness highlights the multiplicity of history that was emphatically denied in a South African context. However, a dangerous door is opened in this playfulness, providing access to ‘lived experiences’ that are not one’s own, thus deflating any significance that these experiences might otherwise have had.

In some of her works Vári interfaces her own body and experiences onto the bodies and experiences of other South Africans as she questions abstruse layers of authenticity and originality. In Souvenir (1996), she (super)imposes a computer image of her own body onto a wooden figurine of an African woman in the traditional pose of balancing a clay pot on her head. The two races of these women merge in an offbeat questioning of racial identity and origin, as the constructed African cyborg sports stereotypically large lips and broad nostrils, as well as blue-green eyes and distinctly fair skin. Vári produced one hundred computer printouts of this image and displayed them randomly on a white gallery wall.

One could read this piece as an attempt by the artist to question the imposition of ‘whiteness’ onto the wooden figurine by the pernicious tourist trade that invented and then co-opted ‘authentic Africanicity’ for the benefit of western economic contrivance. The use of a mass-produced image could be read as a play on the loss of authenticity in these engines of re/production, and displayed in a gallery they goad the typical museological desire for originality and authenticity. However, despite these possible readings, my sense is that Souvenir does not fully subvert the colonial overtones of the wooden figurine in its precarious context as a curio. Instead the work adds a further level of fetishisation to the black female figure that seems, rather, to be used as an exploration ground for the artist’s self-discovery in the ‘new’ South Africa.

Similarly, in Zulu (1995), Vári’s body is grafted onto that of a Zulu woman in a postcard that depicts six women in traditional Zulu dress. Such a postcard, which freezes Africanicity in a traditional and condescendingly quaint mode, is again an archetypal image of the western tourist trade. It is significant to note which woman Vári chose to graft her own features onto. While five of the women are bare-breasted, the central figure (Vári) is fully clothed and wears the largest headdress, indicating superior status. She is also the only figure actually in the act of working. In a South African context the word ‘graft’ is a colloquialism for labour or hard work. It is peculiar then that a white woman would transplant her skin onto the body of a black woman portrayed in the act of labour, while her involvement in this labour is merely feigned.

By grafting her ‘whiteness’ onto this image Vári claims to be instrumental in the establishment of new contexts and realities: ‘I am excavating debris from a Western system which has come to pieces. By reconstructing a certain realness, images, words and objects act as clues in a simulated reality brimming with a shifting, liquid semblance of meaning.’ However, such reconstruction of ‘realness’ is problematic in the sense that these so-called skin-
surface shifts are far from skin-deep in the lived experiences of, for example, Zulu women in South Africa. The manipulated postcard was re-circulated in the tourist industry with the hope that some people would notice the slight shift of reality and would perhaps even interpret it as a subversive act. Despite Vári’s attempt to loosen the boundaries of reality, it is unlikely that a work such as Zulu would successfully achieve the desired response, and the precarious issues surrounding the representation of the black female body outweigh the potentially interesting attempts to play with a semblance of meaning.

In terms of wearing the skin of the Other, Vári’s most troublesome images are Self Portrait I and Self Portrait II. The artist photographed her own naked body and then digitally darkened her skin and adjusted her features in order to change her racial identity. In both images her legs are widespread, although she coyly covers her genitalia with her upper body and arms, staring directly at the viewer. Vári argues that she uncovers, ‘the secure social position in portrayals of identity and race’. She adds, ‘I present a self-portrait, but I am not the black woman in the image. My work is an inquiry into the mechanics which contribute to the establishment and reinforcement of identity.’ In a South African context it seems to be duplicitously dilatory to attempt to uncover secure social position in portrayals of identity and race, and unfortunately Vári’s portrayal of the black woman seems, rather, to comply with stereotypical portrayals of the black female body.

In Art in South Africa: the present tense, the authors Sue Williamson and Ashraf Jamal claim that in these two works Vári’s poses are ‘as removed from being sexually provocative as she could manage’, saying that she looks like a, ‘young animal at bay’. I firmly disagree with this suggestion and submit that

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10 Ibid, p 100.
it is precisely the animalistic pose of *Self Portrait II* that endorses the stereotype of the black female nude. In an essay entitled ‘Coloured Nude: Fetishization, Disguise, Dichotomy’, Canadian scholar Charmaine Nelson maintains that the black female body in art faces a double fetishisation:

Black women are neither simply women nor are they simply black, rather their sex and race are inextricably bound together, combining to situate them as the ultimate ‘other’ to the centered white male heterosexual subject within colonial discourse.\(^\text{11}\)

Nelson contends that one of the differences between the historical artistic portrayals of black and white nudes results from the fact that white women were paternalistically protected by the white male artists, and as such, guises of decency cloaked their images. The black nude, however, was perceived as an obscene body that possessed an untamable animalistic sexual drive. As such, what was deemed pornographic and offensive to the white body was viewed as essential and natural to the black body. Nelson further attests to the fact that the white female nude was traditionally portrayed as either a sleeping (hence passive) muse, or she was disguised in allegory. With her eyes closed she was, by implication, unaware of her bodily presence and the fact that she was being watched. As a result, she was not perceived to be culpable in the voyeuristic gaze. In other words, in pretense to protect the woman, the male artist actually protected himself by constructing a scenario of suppositious innocence. As Nelson asserts, though, the black female nude needed no disguise as, ‘her disguise was the colour of her skin’.\(^\text{12}\) Her ‘blackness’ was used as a marker of difference and inferiority, which meant that her body and sexuality did not need to be enshrouded in innocence. She was already perverted and necessarily active in her perversion and because she supposedly solicited the male gaze, the voyeur, once again, could be vindicated in his act of looking.

In the light of this discussion, then, I do not read Minette Vári’s self-portraits as sexually innocent. The animalistic pose and the potentially solicitous gaze are read more as those of the black woman than those of Vári, and entrench the stereotype of the black female subject. As Lisa Gail Collins points out, a degrading economy of the flesh in terms of the black nude resulted in a self-imposed invisibility where in America, for example, art produced by African-Americans avoided portrayal of the black female nude throughout the nineteenth century. Only in the twentieth century did it once again become a permissible subject, and very tentatively so. It is not insignificant, then, that one of Vári’s strongest works is, I submit, *Coup* (1996), where issues of race, identity and authenticity are explored without direct representation of the black subject, and the very subtle allusion to the artist’s own body avoids the narcissistic tendencies of *Self Portrait* and *Zulu*.

*Coup* consists of three Cibachromes, each one depicting what looks like a wooden walking stick that has been photographed against a solid, black background. As Williamson and Jamal suggest, they allude to photographs in an acquisitions catalogue of an anthropological museum, but the words that appear after the title, *Images of South African curio objects illuminated solely by the light reflected off the skin of the artist*, suggest a more complicated layer. These so-called walking sticks do indeed have a composite history, as they were originally used by native South Africans in rituals and dances, and as weapons. These sticks, however, were significantly shorter and it was the white colonists who gradually lengthened them so as to make them marketable as walking sticks in the western tourist trade. The altered sticks, called ‘knopkieries’, are

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\(^\text{12}\) Ibid, p 105.
sold as ‘authentic’ curios, even though their original function has been adulterated.

The nuance of Vári’s body presence in this work is, I assert, a far more sophisticated contemplation of ‘whiteness’ being imposed onto South African curios than her other more explicit works. Even the title Coup, which at first appears to be a straightforward reference to a coup d’État is more recondite at further analysis. Among the Plains Indian people the word refers to the act of touching an enemy in battle and then escaping, an act that is perceived as extremely brave. In this case the ambiguity of who the enemy is and who escapes whom leaves room for delightful subversion, where the gesture of the tourist trade can be read less as a coup de main (a helping hand) than a manhandling of the stick to make it fit the palm of the western consumer. The allusion to the anthropological museum also insinuates vituperative layers in terms of the decontextualisation and fetishisation of traditional, hand-made objects in the process of display. Coup is, I submit, an absorbing piece in terms of its compounded layers of meaning and history, and should not simply be dismissed due to problematic issues that arise in works such as Self Portrait and Zulu.

Vári seems to resolve these earlier problems in her more recent work such as the video animation Alien (1998), where she uses what she calls an aesthetics of cyber-animation, broadcast news and virtual reality games. In connection with her earlier works she still renders history as construction, but unlike those works the use of her body no longer focuses directly on issues of gender and race. Bodies are contorted and malformed into alien creatures as they interface with re-claimed images from CNN and other media reports on South Africa during the period 1993-1998. ‘[T]o reconstruct the missing parts of a history’, she says, ‘is almost as frightening as staring an apparition in the face.’

The sense of alienation in this piece bears a clever irony as it intoxicatingly depicts a South African’s view of the western world’s view of South Africa. With a twist, Vári refers to photographs that she took when viewing CNN in Detroit as her souvenirs from America, toying with the typical gesture of ‘privileged’ cultures collecting images and objects from ‘under-privileged’ countries. (As such she also alludes to her earlier piece Souvenir). There is a further irony to this piece in the way that it functions as an actual artwork, commenting on the cultural ownership and the monopolisation of images. Just as South African society attempted to control all

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aspects of representation, so are current trends in the art world extending their
tentacles of control over South African art, as everyone delves their fingers in
the curatorial and critical pie, rendering a South Africa that is often foreign to
itself.

Candice Breitz: Surrogate Sexuality
Candice Breitz’s work has elicited acrimonious criticism from Olu Oguibe and
Okwui Enwezor in its representation of the black female subject. As such, this
has become an exemplary case of anti-sexist and anti-racist arguments being
pitted against one another. There is a desperate need for a more sophisticated
model of discussion so that these thorny issues of representation can be
unravelled in a sensitive and deferential way.

In many of Breitz’s works she interjects her own body image into cultural
situations that are not her own by manipulating images that are found, for
example, in pornographic magazines or on tourist paraphernalia. In a work
from the Whiteface Series (1996), she cuts a young, black woman’s face out of a
postcard and photographs herself holding this ‘mask’ up to her own face. In the
image she lies with her arms behind her head as if in suggestive sexual
submission, a typical pose of the female nude as portrayed in art history. The
cut out black face, if read as a kind of ‘African mask’, could allude to the
predominantly white art world that has abused a so-called exotic African
subjectivity. However, I fail to see how Breitz subverts this abuse. While the
female gaze is significant to this piece, there is not, I submit, merely one way
that this gaze can be read. Breitz looks directly and seductively at the viewer,
while the cut-out face of the black woman bears a frown. I have already
discussed Charmaine Nelson’s suggestion that traditionally the white female
nude was portrayed with averted gaze while the black female nude was
portrayed with an active, solicitous gaze. Here the white gaze, deliberately not
averted, could be read either as solicitous or as indignantly confrontational. If
it were read as solicitous, then the use of the black face, which is being
motioned towards a covering up of the white face, could be read as
dangerously close to the abuse of the black woman as a guise of exoneration.
However, along the lines of Nelson’s argument that the averted gaze was used
by the male artist to protect the white woman in her so-called unaware state,
Breitz seems to be distinctly aware of her body presence and the fact that she is
being watched. If the white gaze is indeed meant to meet the viewer with a
piquant challenge, it is unclear what role the black face plays. What is
disturbing about this image is the expression on the black woman’s face, which
does not seem to empower her in this context.

In another work from the Whiteface Series (1996), Breitz uses the same
postcard and this time grafts her white face onto the body of the black woman.
It is significant to notice that while, in the previous image, her own gaze can be
read as a challenge to any voyeuristic glance that might be directed towards her
own naked body, in this image her eyes are shut, giving license to the viewer
to look at the black woman’s body. Furthermore, her head is thrown back in the
throes of sexual ecstasy, suggesting the pleasure of being watched, although
the body being watched is not her own. The sexualisation of this image is
heightened by the way that the images have been spliced to produce four
breasts and five hands. While the black woman’s hands in the original postcard
simply hold onto a stick in a prosaic pose, the white hands that have been
added to the image allude to the abandonment of sexual bliss, and the lower
hand, in particular, gestures invitation and submission in proximity of the black woman’s genitalia.

A contrast of these two works is quite unnerving, as one plays out the body language and the gaze that is allocated to the two women of different racial identities. I cannot, as a critic, say that Breitz deliberately orchestrated each gesture and look in order to disenfranchise the black woman, but I do suggest that the result does little to empower the black woman. Considering South Africa’s sordid history, white South African artists have to take extraordinary care in the representation of the black subject. As such I am not surprised by Okwui Enwezor’s suggestion in his essay ‘Reframing the Black Subject’ that Breitz ‘is just too much in a hurry to show her unimpeachable feminist credentials and her equally enlightened sympathy towards the much abused African woman’. Speaking of Breitz and other South African artists (specifically white and female) Enwezor further asserts that, ‘there is a certain over-determination that accompanies their gestures’, and that, ‘in each instance... it is the black woman that is disavowed, lodged in the lowest register of articulation’. While I agree with part of what Enwezor says in this essay, I detect a similar over-determinism in much of his writing. I find it rather peculiar that while he attempts to reframe the black subject by pointing out that the black female figure is perpetually disavowed, he persistently refers to the black subject in the masculine:

I want to return to how today this fantasy again images the black subject in the old and warped frame of the apartheid era as lack representing him at the liminal point of his defeat. That is, his story, as spoken through the transitional identity of post-apartheid contemporary representations, is narrated in the past tense, as if the narrators want to stop history; as if everything about the black subject resides only in his pre-lingual period, in the residue of his diminished state as subject, prior to his act of speech, fixed in his eternal silence... But why am I unconvinced by the remonstrative gestures of those artists who sentimentalise African images that are devoid of conflict, of the quietly suffering but still noble African? Since he can’t speak for himself, he is spoken for.  

What is likewise alarming is the fact that both Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe criticise this work by female artists, but largely ignore work by white South African male artists that is as problematic and as harmful to the black subject.

In an essay entitled ‘Beyond Visual Pleasures: A Brief Reflection on the Work of Contemporary African Women’, Olu Oguibe discusses the work of young, white, South African women who, he claims, have pathological, violent and racist intent. For a critic who calls for a more sensitive understanding and portrayal of the Other that respects human dignity and allows the Other to speak for herself, his self-righteous display of bravado is appallingly splattered with modernist assumptions as to the intent and psychical makeup of the artists at his prey. Phrases like ‘this pathological determination’, ‘the violent effects and intent’, ‘there is no doubt that...’, ‘the intent is always to...’, ‘precise nature of the artist’s process’, ‘evident psychotic impulse’ and ‘it is an art of hatred and violence’, not only pollute a paper that otherwise has a few meaningful moments, but reveal, as in Enwezor’s writing, an over-determinism that matches that of the very artworks he is criticising.

Oguibe claims that Breitz displays a ‘pathological determination to undress black women and to force them, as it were, into a state of pornographic complicity and availability even in disregard of cultural reservations or their
protestations’. While I agree with Oguibe that Breitz’s images are often tenuous with regards to the black female figure, I find his literal, oversimplistic reading of materials and symbolism just as contentious, especially in the twenty-first century when these methods are commonly used by numerous artists without being forced into predetermined hermeneutical spaces. For example, Oguibe argues that Breitz’s use of collage suggests her personal hatred towards black women because she literally tears the women apart (by tearing the paper) and thus objectifies their bodies. (If this were the case she would have to hate white women too as she tears images of their bodies apart as well.) He also argues that she desires to literally white out the black woman’s subjectivity because she splashes her images with white-out. Such a one-dimensional reading would at least be acceptable if Oguibe said something like, ‘I read a certain violence in the tearing of paper...’, but to claim, in absolute terms that he knows the artist’s intent and emotional state through her medium is inexcusably irresponsible critique. He continues to assert that,

...she does not merely hide the women's identities, she does so vigorously and almost compulsively mutilating their faces, by scratching out their eyes. Here a psychoanalytic reading of process is perhaps very necessary: how may we interpret such gesture of calculated physical infliction? Why does the artist elect a private and pathological ritual of mutilation in the form of scratching out eyes, or the alternative political ritual of symbolic obliteration in the form of whitening out – an act so particularly loaded with racial and historical significance – to the conventional option of neatly taping over the eyes that we associate with sensitivity in the media? How serious may we take claims of feminist centering of black women in the work of an artist who methodically indulges in processes that so uncannily ritualize the symbolic violation and mutilation of women’s bodies, and so potently parallel historical violence against people in her country? How does the artist's claim of constructing feminist critique obliterate the evident psychotic impulse in her methods and the fact that rather than constitute a critique, her art and its methods exhibit a barely hidden colonialist inclination to destroy and erase; that whitening out black women’s eyes visually and symbolically resonates with a desire for ethnic cleansing? How does an act that immediately bring to our minds the Caucasian policy in Australia and Tasmania at the beginning of the 20th century of ‘whitening out’ the natives or ‘fucking them white’, possibly constitute itself into a critique or an empowering feminist art? To the service of what agenda may we freely call feminism? Breitz’s art is not a critique of hatred and violence: it is an art of hatred and violence.

Such criticism is very unhelpful and does little to empower anyone. Ironically, while Oguibe questions how seriously one can take a feminism that is so overdetermined (not to mention pathologically violent) it is hard to take him seriously in his over-the-top style of writing. Sadly though, beneath this barrage, there are important points that need to be made. As a ‘feminist’ myself (although I am not sure where a Kenyan-born South African immigrant to Canada fits into the homogenized word ‘feminist’), I have had to consider how the fight against patriarchy might conflict with the fight against racism, particularly in a South African context. As passionate as I might be regarding the oppression of women, I cannot, as a white South African woman, begin to claim that I have an understanding of the suffering of black South African women. As such it would be audacious for me to rope black women into my ‘feminist’ agenda in a simplistic way that might portray us as being on a par in terms of our oppression. However, having lived in North America for a few
years, I am also acutely aware that white South African feminism simply cannot be shuffled under the wings of ‘western feminism’ as the issues are vastly different.

Part of the problem with the attacks between Breitz and Oguibe which bleed far beyond these pages, is that there is an over-simplification as to who people are and how they fit into the cultures and ideologies that swirl around them. Simply put, one could say that the debate deals with the ‘black third world woman’ who is being fought over and supposedly protected by a ‘black third world man’ and a ‘white first world feminist woman’. Of course the discussion is ludicrously more complex than that when one considers that Oguibe is a black Nigerian man who works in the centre of the art world and has gained a lot of power and respect in the field of African art, and that Breitz is a white South African woman who also lives in the privileged centre of New York. Somehow this power struggle between people who certainly are not devoid of power themselves has to end, and those with less overt power have to be given space to enter the debate. There are other strong voices that need to be heard. Black South African women, who are so easily lost in this debate as ‘victims’, are the epitome of strength, courage and endurance. It would be criminal, then, to imply, through the monopoly of academic discussions, that these women are unable to speak for themselves.

**Penny Siopis: Destabilising Inquiry**

Some of Penny Siopis’s works reveal similar problems to those discussed above and in ‘Reframing the Black Subject’, Enwezor claims that her work reveals a facileness that is unable to deal with the complexities of the representation of the black subject. I will briefly discuss Siopis’s 1994 piece *Mask and My Self*, which does seem to lack intricacy in its juxtaposition of white and black
corporeality. However, I will then analyse her installation from the second Johannesburg Biennale, *Permanent Collection*, which grapples with the problem of representing the other in a genuinely gritty way. Through this piece Siopis begins a destabilising inquiry that tends towards Trinh’s ambiguity.

In the visually striking image *Mask and My Self*, Siopis holds a wooden African ‘mask’ of a female torso in front of her own naked body so that her breasts and stomach are covered by the breasts and stomach of the stylistically portrayed African woman. In the image the artist wears the white cotton gloves which are typically worn in museums, not only to protect the artifacts from bodily contact, but perhaps also to protect the curator’s body from the ‘foreign’ objects. With this museological reference the artist comments on the display of African art and artifacts, specifically in a western and almost exclusively white context.

A scrawny white body contrasts sharply with the voluptuous breasts and stomach of the carved black body, which is held up like a shield. Perhaps a pertinent question to ask is who protects whom in this scenario? It is quite evident that western museums masquerade a protection of (other) culture, only to protect their own positions of power in relation to the other, and one can presume that it is this supercilious surrogate that Siopis attempts to subvert. However, by attempting to liberate the ‘mask’ or ‘body cast’ from its predestined position of decontextualised anthropological artifact, the artist only succeeds in furthering such patronising protection, ultimately protecting herself once more. What comes through most strongly in this image is a concern about the white person’s relationship to the carved object, rather than a concern about the scurrilousness typically shown towards the object itself. In other words, even though there is an attempt to ‘liberate’ the carved black body, instead of masking the ‘whiteness’, the black figure is actually used, once again, to place ‘whiteness’ at the centre. By reading the piece in this manner, I am not suggesting that Siopis deliberately and maliciously centres ‘whiteness’, as a look at her larger body of work certainly reveals a concern for the way South African history has mistreated black subjects.

*Permanent Collection* (1994–5), which was part of the exhibition ‘Taking Liberties: the Body Politic’ curated by Pitika Ntuli and Colin Richards, portrays an honesty and vulnerability.
The installation was exhibited in a darkened room of the Gertrude Posel Gallery of the University of Witwatersrand that could only be reached by descending a number of stairs into what Richards calls a 'subterrain' space. The work made use of the Standard Bank Permanent Collection of traditional African art, which was juxtaposed with a video piece by Siopis entitled *Per Kind Permission (Fieldwork)*. The collection of African art was displayed in glass cabinets and some of the objects were covered in remnants of trade merchandise such as tea, coffee, sugar and spices, as if they had all been piled into one crate, spilling over each other en route. As such, an analogy is drawn between colonial trade and the collection of cultural objects. One of the cabinets is boarded up with a random lattice of wooden slats suggesting a deterrence of access. This is further impacted by the fact that the viewer's motion turns on the light, making her or him partially responsible for the visibility of the objects. As Richards suggests, 'Innocence and ignorance have limited currency in this action'. This impeded access to the work insinuates Enwezor's motion to reduce the display of the black subject. In his conclusion to 'Reframing the

21 Richards, *op cit*, p 141.
Black Subject’ he advises that, ‘the less anxiously repeated the image, the better the opportunity to find an ethical ground to use its index as a form of discursive address, for radical revision, as well as to unsettle the apparatus of power which employs it as a structurally codified narrative of dysfunction’.22 Whether entirely successful or not, it is precisely such an ethical ground that Siopis attempts to uncover.

Reflected in the glass cabinets is the video projection Per Kind Permission (Fieldwork) which, through its title, similarly alludes to issues of copyright where an image cannot be reproduced without permission. (Ironically though, Enwezor has previously published photographs of the artist’s work without her consent). Siopis plays on the fact that artists like herself are being advised not to represent the black body in their work, but instead of glibly retorting to this council, she honestly agonises over the issues and possibilities. In the video the artist’s own back is used as a ground on which two anonymous hands draw in black ink. Siopis’s back is covered with a pure white substance that contrasts with the colour of her own flesh, thus subtly deconstructing the homogenised concept of ‘whiteness’. The white field covers the ‘space between the nape of the neck and the small of the back’, which, says Richards, is, ‘the space of back-stabbing, of whipping, of turning away. It is a vulnerable space.’23 The hands, which are again covered in museum gloves, draw two images in succession onto the white field on the artist’s back. It is significant to note that the sources for these images are already representations themselves, thus questioning the role of authenticity as well as the right to appropriate images. One of the drawings is taken from a face cast from an anonymous living subject that was made at the Department of Anatomy along with other masks, some of which were actually death masks made for medico-anthropological study. The mask, and the re-representation thereof intimates the practice of making casts of ‘bushmen’ for display in natural history museums in South Africa, where again, the process of representation is far from inculpable. Subtly Siopis questions her own relationship to the Standard Bank Permanent Collection and its relationship, in turn, to western museological institutions.

As the drawings are created on the back, the white field cracks and peels, leaving parts of the skin exposed and raw from rubbing and scratching. By destabilising the ground on which representation is performed, Siopis begins to open up lacunae in the debate of representing the Other so that the dichotomisation that preserves the current deadlock can begin to shift and make way for more nuanced, sensitive possibilities. Per Kind Permission (Fieldwork) does not claim to bestow solutions. After all, fieldwork is, by definition, a transitory exploration that will inevitably be reconfigured as the implications of its research start to live under the skin of its investigator. I therefore see this installation and video piece as a positive attempt to move out of the quagmire that has silenced so many in its insidious endeavour to protect the other. This does not, however, mean that the debate ends here or that it ever ends, as indeed the underlying issue of authenticity is an interminable excursion into the unknown depths of subjectivity that eludes a truly graspable discernment of self and other.

WEARING THE TRAPPINGS OF AUTHENTICITY

While some might argue that it is not Siopis’s place, as a white South African woman, to search for an ethical ground for the representation of the black subject, it would be astute to heed Enwezor’s suggestion that, ‘identity should

22 Enwezor, op cit, p 39.
23 Richards, op cit, p 142.
never be turned into a copyright’, for, ‘to do so would be to fetishise identity, to render it into a totem of mythology, an ideological fantasy’. However, in the search for such a ground, it is essential to remain alert, and not to fall into the trap that Trinh T. Minh-ha calls planned authenticity:

The part of savior has to be filled as long as the belief in the problem of ‘endangered species’ lasts. To persuade you that your past and cultural heritage are doomed to eventual extinction and thereby keep you occupied with the Savior’s concern, inauthenticity is condemned as a loss of origins and a whitening (or faking) of non-Western values... Today, planned authenticity is rife; as a product of hegemony and a remarkable counterpart of universal standardization, it constitutes an efficacious means of silencing the cry of racial oppression. We no longer wish to erase your difference. We demand, on the contrary, that you remember and assert it. At least, to a certain extent. Every path I/i take is edged with thorns. On the one hand I play into the Savior’s hands by concentrating on authenticity, for my attention is numbed by it and diverted from other, important issues; on the other hand, I do feel the necessity to return to my so-called roots, since they are the fount of my strength, the guiding arrow to which I constantly refer before heading in a new direction.

Trinh poignantly captures some of the different angles in the discussion of authenticity and I agree with her suggestion that planned authenticity is often a product of hegemony. It is such a hegemony that constructs the contrived categories of ‘third world woman’, ‘first world man’ and ‘western feminist’.

As Kirsten Holst Petersen asserts in an essay entitled ‘First Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature’, ‘...universal sisterhood is not a given biological condition’, and she poses the question whether the fight for female equality or the fight against western colonialism should take precedence. By regarding race, economics and class as less important than sexual difference, many ‘western feminists’ have constructed a reductionistic notion of difference that Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls ‘Third World Difference’:

The assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy (as male dominance — men as a correspondingly coherent group) which can be applied universally and cross-culturally.

Talpade Mohanty argues that sisterhood should not be based merely on gender, because that does not take seriously racial constructions that radically effect gender constructions:

The homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials, but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals. Thus, for instance, in any given piece of feminist analysis, women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of shared oppression. What binds women together is a sociological notion of ‘sameness’ of their oppression... This results in an assumption of women as an always-already constituted group, one which has been labeled ‘powerless’, ‘exploited’, ‘sexually harassed’, etc, by feminist scientific, economic, legal and sociological discourses. (Notice that this is quite similar to sexist discourse labeling women weak, emotional, having math anxiety, etc).
As Anne McClintock argues in her book *Imperial Leather: Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, African women were, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, skeptical (and rightly so) of a feminism that they viewed as only a middle class, white feminism, but that in recent years a transformational African discourse on feminism has emerged. In 1990 the National Executive of the African National Congress (ANC) issued a statement on the emancipation of women which declared that all ‘laws, customs, traditions and practices which discriminate against women shall be held to be unconstitutional’. As McClintock caustically adds, ‘If the ANC remains faithful to this document, virtually all existing practices in South Africa’s legal, political and social life will be rendered unconstitutional.’ A few months later leaders from the ANC Women’s Section returned to South Africa from exile with the statement that, ‘Feminism has been misinterpreted in most third world countries... there is nothing wrong with feminism. It is as progressive or reactionary as nationalism. Nationalism can be reactionary or progressive. We have not got rid of nationalism. And with feminism it is the same.’ Of course, such a statement does not simply embrace ‘western feminism’. Nor does it embrace a South African version of ‘western feminism’ where white South African women inevitably fall into the position of being both coloniser and colonised. As such, Okwui Enwezor is absolutely correct in suggesting that white women must first recognise their own complicity in racial atrocities, and that one needs to recognise the ‘vast chasm that still separates black women in South Africa, socially, economically, and in access to educational opportunities’. However, while Enwezor calls for a ‘refusal to fix blackness in any stable meaning’, he is quick to homogenise whiteness, especially what he calls ‘white female desire’. Even though he declares that the ‘...hardened position of binaries, black/white, settler/native, coloniser/colonised etc, [is no longer] tenable’, he insists on an indefensible concept of ‘white woman’. He suggests that, ‘in her submissive position, the white woman still does those colonial errands which denigrate black men and women, partly as a member of the tribe, partly to make the white fathers of the Broederbond happy’. He ignores the fact that for numerous white South African women, the fathers of the Broederbond — an exclusively male, extreme right-wing political group — are the last people that they would think of complying to. Certainly, I can speak for myself as a white South African woman and say that the Broederbond, with its detestable die-hard ideals of racism and sexism does not begin to register on my own map of reality or experience. I do, however, agree with Enwezor that ‘whiteness’ is an ‘exorbitant space of subjectivity’, but it is not simply one space, and in a South African context, ‘white feminism’ does not fit neatly into the mold of ‘western feminism’, as if that in itself were one thing. As the ANC Woman’s Section further suggests, to denounce all feminisms as imperialist...

...erases from memory the long histories of women’s resistance to local and imperialist patriarchies... Moreover, if all feminisms are derided as a pathology of the West, there is a very real danger that Western feminism will remain hegemonic... Instead, women of color are calling for the right to fashion feminism to suit their own worlds.

It seems to be a hazardous consignment for one to step forward in this debate, and it is at this point that Trinh’s emphasis on destabilisation sets the stage for new possibilities, albeit extremely fragile. She urges us to recognise a necessary ambivalence, for as she says,
...the line dividing I and Not-I, us and them, or him and her is not (cannot) always (be) as clear as we would like it to be. Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak. Of all the layers that form the open (never finite) totality of T, which is to be filtered out as superfluous, fake, corrupt, and which is to be called pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic? Which, indeed, since all interchange, revolving in an endless process? (According to the context in which they operate, the superfluous can become the real; the authentic can prove fake; and so on). Authenticity as a need to rely on an ‘undisputed origin’, is prey to an obsessive fear; that of losing a connection. Everything must hold together... a clear origin will give me a connection back through time, and I shall, by all means, search for that genuine layer of myself to which I can always cling.36

Trinh’s writing can be viewed as a successfully inconclusive rejoinder to the over-determinism of some of the critical and artistic work that I have discussed. She creates a space for the subjectivity of black women to dwell without prescribing the qualifications of what ‘black’ or ‘woman’ might mean, and without mandating the parameters of this discussion.

It is indeed extremely dangerous for white women to portray black women in their art, just as it is dangerous for male critics to take over the debate of this portrayal. Many of these portrayals have, unfortunately, consolidated the stereotype of the black female subject, thus disregarding the distinct identities of individual women. It is a facile act to inculpate those who do not succeed in creating a responsible space for this discussion, especially in a South African context where the lack of intermediaries is ingrained into social consciousness. It is more complex, though, to find ways to discuss representation, be it by artists, curators or academics, that is not acquiescent to the simplistic categorisations of ‘western woman’, ‘western feminism’, ‘third world woman’ or ‘third world man’. The representation of race does not have to be a deadly explosive on one’s tongue in a perfunctory sense. While race consciousness, and particularly the portrayal thereof, is tricky at best, the allocation of who is allowed to represent whom only serves to enforce a false authenticity and constitute, through homogenisation, the silencing of oppression. Similarly, the pitting of anti-racist and anti-sexist debates against one another leaves little room for mobility, a key component of worthy change. It would be consequential then, especially for those in positions of power, to heed Trinh T. Min-ha’s lament that, ‘Every path I/i take is edged with thorns’, and to use that as a way of moving forward without being oblivious to the many intermediaries surrounding the issues of race and gender consciousness.

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