Cape Town lies approximately fourteen hours from London, a journey traced on a plane monitor leading to growing anticipation as it edges towards Africa, crosses the Mediterranean, sub Sahara to the east and then the south. On arrival, one is numbed by the sheer distance and time that it takes to cross the vast continent of Africa. Exhausted, the journey does not relax the mind from expectation – of Africa, of post apartheid, of beauty and of violence. These factors have somehow been ingrained into our psyches and the body reacts accordingly – waiting to be enthralled whilst still needing to guard the luggage.

The slow progress through custom control exacerbates the state of anxiety. The strangeness of being in an all white crowd of tourists approaching the black custodians of the state makes one imagine that one is in democratic South Africa. But like all custodians, these passport checkers were placed like doormats to the reality of the politics and history of this state.

It is in the inaugural sight of Cape Town, which is like all poverty stricken metropolises in the world, that we encounter the ‘natives’– as they eke a living from foreign trade. We also encounter custodians of trolleys, fruit juices, car parks and parking spaces. They cajole you, enticing you with their limbering extended vowels to partake in their services – while their white counterparts, the ‘settler communities’, South Afrikaans extend their privileged up-market services to ‘reduce’ the black to belittled bartering. The first lesson being that the economy seems as one would have entertained during the apartheid years, those condemned because of their race, colour and creed to be servile and those who believe in their god given right to rule in empathy, a liberal or outright racist attitude due to their European antecedents.

As one drives out of the airport, the usual shanty towns and hamlets which are found in and around the airports of most Third World countries line the streets that pave the diameter of the airport. The heat generated by low flying planes intensifies the heat generated by the land of the sun into a dizzying
milieu of stricken poverty. Yet even within this black protoplasm of apartheid, the holy spectre of life’s ability to endure is evident. Children playing with old bicycle wheels, shanty shops, odd lime coloured house-mosques and corrugated steel roofs that glisten with pride and permanence in the midday sun. These symbols of forbearance have to be accorded respect rather then cynicism as they have survived one of the most outrageous onslaughts in the late capitalist box of tricks.

As the view of black South Africa recedes from the motorway and the view of Cape Town ‘proper’ becomes more apparent, so does the apparent disparity of the colonised and the colonisers’ abodes. Two cities, twinned by the horrors of the recent past: a geography created by magnetic opposites. Cape Town spawns high rise and Spanish villas, painted white with long winding approach roads lined with fan palms. One has to be careful and water one’s eyes by blinking often. The long plane journey might have mistakenly brought you to some wrong destination such as the south of Spain or France, with Le Corbousier inspired designs of private mansions, Madrid style villas with terra-cotta roof tiles, manicured garden with their bourgainvilia and crazy paving. The schizophrenia does not end there, the further we travel away from the black enclaves, the grander and more exclusive and expensive the white thoroughfares become. We enter gated communities through private roads which are serviced by black servants, black and coloured nannies and swimming pool cleaners, where shopping by phone is delivered by car and where entry is strictly controlled and signs proclaim immediate gun action if trouble arises. Here the insurance policy is belonging to a private army of security firms that patrol and assail any ‘foreigners’. These gated communities house nuclear white families of ex-patriots from the ‘developed’ world including Britain, Russia, Holland, as well as the settler white communities of Afrikaans.

Cape Town is a divided city: in terms of its economic abilities, geographic location and cultural spaces. Most disturbingly it is built on a divided set of ideas for its sustenance and future. Apartheid is not post, apartheid is real. One lives in different spaces, places that do not resemble or provide a continuity, they ipso facto contain dreams of further conquering (if not of championing the status quo) and dreams of fighting for equality. The sporadic membrane is to be found in individual lives and works that emerge in decisions which are made about sharing resources, supplying the needy, crossing over and agreeing to forget the past. Evidence of these journeys are emerging in curated projects of alliances and communal uplifting. On the whole these paths are infected with religious zeal or guilt ridden liberalism or worst of all an unrecognised mish-mash of patronising immunity acting positively on behalf of the dispossessed.

Cape Town really didn’t feel like Africa on the whole, aspects of it were like a forgotten Sussex sea town full of retired grandees who never emerge into the bright sun; their activities negotiated by the weather and the importance of socialising. The outward flat planes surrounding the city housed controlled labour forces that serve the city and are restored daily to the ever burgeoning shanty towns. Mediatating the polarity are the ‘coloured folks’ – living in semi-abandoned central colonial houses amongst the young student population. The coloured function as a buffer zone of economy and not much else. The ‘coloured’ do the accountancy, have corner shops and mediate stealth like wealth between the whites and blacks. They are not the adventure capitalists who have the power or contact zone with the ‘West’; they are re-employed to
help trickle down so it doesn’t splatter and spoil the post-apartheid sensibilities of cautiously letting in the middle class blacks and maybe waiting to see if the urban and shanty town blacks can rise up to the challenges set by white ‘civilisation’.

Cape Town is so divided that it felt like even the insects had been relocated to a ‘proper’ area demarcated for the purposes of the Afrikaans dream of White Africa, of white Africans. What was most annoying was the sheer odium to breaking down apartheid from the young and old landocracy. Like a lost tribe that the world had refused to acknowledge, the Afrikaanser mentality adopted by the nationalistic whites in South Africa was based on secret convention: not to acknowledge change, to wear the blinkers to the twenty first century. To stare back at the golden era that had brought semi-Mediterranean dreams to this land, where apartheid with all its percolating faults and shrouds of death still manufactured a vision firmly rooted in modernity. The affront of the natives to ask for their land, their right, their vote, their say – their opuscle/minor composition within the national policy was if anything uneducated, unworldly, unbelonging, and subservient compared to the fatherhood of Rhode’s Southern Africa. In this apocalypse of murdering, guarding, astute Machiavellian society all is viable but very little is spoken across boundaries. Everybody acknowledges their state of belonging, their historical baggage, acts accordingly but also organises accordingly. Whites, blacks and coloured are found in their own and mostly separate cafes, shebeens, pubs, churches, gardens, barbecues, beaches, terraces, corners talking about life, talking about change, organising a living, discussing the future without each other, incessantly hoping for one’s own bias to command supremacy, to be allocated all resources, to live without and within. Some even hope to return back to the days of Robben Island, to the plateau of apartheid where everybody had a place, nobody was out of place and you knew what the bottom looked like.

Within the confines of the cool resplendency of the classically European building that serves as the South African National Gallery – yet another building like all the shops and cafes downtown, that can only be accessed by the public by a buzzer system – lay the work of black South African artist Kay Hassan. The exhibition, the prize money, the publication, and the tour have been funded by the DaimlerChrysler Award for South African Contemporary Art. It was surprising that William Kentridge and/or the other three white South Africans who seem to represent South Africa everywhere were gazzumped at this juncture. This in itself does not imply a change of heart on the part of the establishment, like the argument in Britain expounded by some that racism no longer exists in British arts since two ‘black’ artists have won the Turner prize and consistently ‘artists of colour’ have been nominated. The DaimlerChrysler Award for South African Contemporary Art falls squarely in the way culture is used to globalise brands as well as how companies become arbitrators of taste and facilitate ventures – the cunning of commercialism.

Before one enters the space occupied by the work of Hassan, the permanent contemporary collection full of modernist heroism and staunch European sensibilities acts as an abject lounge to apartheid and its present predicament. Hassan’s sensibilities exploit this prelude of the museum in that they bring the disowned, dejected and swollen-with-rage materials such as torn billboards, dry bread, broken bicycles and flea ridden street blankets as primary materials. Still bearing traces of human use, these are heavy objects, laden signifiers
which say more than the clever punning so favoured by his European and American counterparts.

The white walls of the museum are split and simultaneously held together by the billboard paper constructions, *The Flight*, which assembles large black figures migrating, serving and sitting (or is it waiting or meditating). They approach each other across the room, and between the rooms, making a split narrative of townships and barren landscapes. These paper constructions can be best described as works that are about workers, tentative descriptions about the lack of work, and how one makes something out of nothing. A morbid monumentality that considers reconciliation from separate development to apparent development. There is a totality in the subject, the space it occupies and its sensitive treatment that further creates a necessity to explore the condition within such a public space.

Hassan carries this humanistic treatment to the homeless and labouring

*The Flight, paper construction, bicycle, 280 x 850 x 400 cm, 1995-96*
classes in cities. The video installation, Johannesburg by Night, presents his profound observation of those who occupy the floor in stations and other smooth surfaces of capitalism such as arcades. Here we view them in the semi dream-like spaces that the installation creates by using half slumbering figures captured in their gross detail by the roving video eye, re-playing these private moments on monitors on the floor. These works appropriate the sensibilities of the global school of installation, specifically in the encounter of the spectator and the theatricality to construct meaning for the spectator. In this way Hassan stops our strolling mentality as we approach art like window shopping and thus confronts us with the images of distress and intimidation which are real. In a interview with fellow South African artist David Koloane, Hassan states: 'Our role is still that of informing the public about social and cultural issues as we did during the apartheid era, because our environment is still the same.' It is this sameness that pervades the condition of post apartheid that Hassan questions. The installations are one of the few public manifestations that explored the black condition with gravitas and sensitivity. It seemed that the main sources of contemporary images of the black subject that have emerged in the public realm are hastily constructed tribal objects for the mittel-European safarist – mainly Ndelebe or Zulu in reference or the soap operas of distant

1 A conversation between Kay Hassan and David Koloane, Johannesburg, December 1999, p 20.
parliamentary drums. In both cases the black has became a subject of repudiation. The mechanics set up to dismantle apartheid and shared power strategies which have emerged are publicly cannibalised by the media, especially prevalent is the vitriol in broadcasting, the pensive gossip in the street, the mitigation and disregard for the black intellectual community which, in some cases, are the most visible inheritors of the political office as councillors, ministers and managers of the state economy. The black subject should be replenishing the vacated centre after apartheid but the strategies at play are creating a hideous settlement. Hassan finds himself in a privileged position perceived as a vanguardist by the cultural milieu, and manages to use this privilege to console and construct from the emerging condition through the relationship of art to society a critique and protest rather than a withdrawal into an artificial aesthetic based on commercial survival. His heroic illusions play an important role in art’s struggle and in the development of a vocabulary that insists on political and social change rather than a denial by adopting a neo-conservative position.

His works are important in that they announce what is ‘ours’ for Hassan and the black struggle he refers to, although what has been ‘ours’ has been so
ignored and refused in the dominant culture of apartheid. The paper constructions such as *End of the Day* and *Kosuku*, made respectively in 1996 and 1998, are examples of constructing strength out of fragile culled co-existence. The torn billboard posters are reconfigured to construct dead-pan portraits of young people who gaze back at us with broken noses and stitched eyes. Even within these collage types the subject is highlighted, the context alive and the plea registered.

On a micro level, Hassan, like all future recipients of the DaimlerChrysler Awards, will find himself recognising the limitations of the partnership but having to work within the prevailing climate – where resistance may itself be problematic for the long term goals of dismantling the EuroAmerican matrix. It is within such partnerships that South African artists will potentially be able to define the explosive human condition of their existence similar to the reverberations caused by some Jewish artists who have been able to define and process the effects of the holocaust.

The effects of apartheid, the historical legacy and prevailing problems attached to practice are now beginning to be discussed from the black perspective. It is within this realm that artists such as Hassan are entrusted. It is within the scattered and amorphous South African condition that Hassan can start to describe and subscribe for the next generation the terms of cultural regeneration, and to clarify the battle plans of dispersal and dissemination of contemporary practice. It is within the ruins of apartheid that apartheid’s canonical sensibilities need to be exhausted and new ones created to transform institutional assumptions and positions.

There is a long process for life to be entwined into art, not as a stuffy academic exercise or a critique of the traditional, nor a revival of avant-garde argument but as an oppositional practice. Of searching for a South Africa, a South Africanism both historic and in the future, an oppositional practice of precolonial evidence and post colonial discussion, of ambiguity and paradox, borne of beauty and disdain, of diminishing nationalism and incurable conflict, in poetry and sheer arrogance. The title of one of the works foregrounds the reality here: *Non-European Library* for black and white South Africans. It is indeed a separate and vital development.