

# De-segregating the Audience: Race & the Politics of Exhibitions

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This was prepared for a panel discussion with the same title, held at the Centre for the Book, Cape Town, on 19 August 2010. The panel formed part of the “Beyond the Racial Lens” conference, which was itself part of the “Bonani 2010 Festival of Documentary Photography” convened by SAHO. Thembinkosi Goniwe and Khwezi Gule were also part of the panel, which was chaired by Farzanah Badsha.

Historically, exhibitions have constituted a dominant mode for displaying art. However, for documentary photographers, exhibitions have constituted only one of several sites to place their work, along with publication in the mass media and, very importantly, the publication of books. Thus it is interesting to speculate why in a conference on documentary photography, there is not a single panel focusing on the media; nor is there a discussion on literacy, book prices and the ‘likely reader’ for books published by photographers. Instead here we are, three fine arts trained individuals who have published very little on photography, in my case nothing at all, commenting on exhibitions at a conference on documentary photography.

I can only assume that this intriguing turn of events has something to do with the increased visibility of photography in art exhibitions. This includes a generation of photographers who initially operated outside the established networks of ‘art’ but are today embraced by the art-world, such as David Goldblatt, George Hallett, Guy Tillim, Santu Mofokeng, and Roger Ballen;<sup>1</sup> as well as a relatively recent ‘movement’ of photographers who have been treated as artists from the outset, such as Zwelethu Mthethwa, Peter Hugo, Zanele Muholi, Lolo Veleko, and Mikhail Subotzky; although some of us could perhaps be forgiven for thinking that much of their work does not stray that far from the parameters of what is generally viewed as documentary photography.<sup>2</sup>

But what of those photographers who came from a fine arts background, such as Omar Badsha, Chris Ledochowski, Paul Grendon, and Roger Meintjies? This ‘school’ of photographers is perhaps the most relevant for the topic of this panel. After all, here we have a generation of photographers who turned their backs on the elitism and impotence of what the art-world was during a period of intense struggle. Along with a number of dissident fine arts graduates who crossed over to graphic media (particularly posters and banners, but also cartoons), this generation of visually articulate cultural workers opted for immediate, direct, socially engaged modes of image making.<sup>3</sup> They embraced principles inimical to the rarefied realm of the fine arts, where photography (and printmaking), contrary to their innate potential to be reproduced in great numbers, were restricted to small, signed editions, testament to the dominance of the economic interests over political ones.

For this generation of cultural workers, engaging a wide audience was critical. It was a diverse audience, comprising the local and international, black and white, the silenced and the influential. It is important to recognise that while the mass media offered a much greater prospect than the art gallery or museum for the visibility of their work, exhibitions themselves were never rejected. Instead, exhibitions were adapted for the public event, from modestly attended conferences to mass meetings. For such exhibitions images were typically unframed, unsigned, un-numbered, modest in scale and predominantly in black and white. Discussion was more likely to centre on the image, particularly its content, than on the photographer.

If photographers played a crucial role in challenging the paradigm of fine arts, and in developing a viable alternative, namely an engaged or 'committed' art that was not centred on art galleries but on sites of broad public engagement, a critical question arises. Is it that social and political conditions have changed making it possible to produce work that is primarily destined for the gallery, or is that the galleries have changed, making them a viable site for politically and socially engaged work?

The first part of this question – have the broad conditions changed – will presumably be addressed later in this conference. Suffice then to state my view that the argument to produce relevant work that engages with fundamental questions of human rights has not receded. The majority still live on or beyond the margins of what can possibly constitute an acceptable standard of living. And if one contrasts images of confrontation between communities and the police in the 80s with images of service delivery protests today, it appears that the only visible change is in the colour of the armed police. Furthermore, freedom of expression may be enshrined in the South African constitution, but it is under constant threat.<sup>4</sup> Clearly the 'activist' photographer, along with other artists concerned with human rights, still has a valuable role to play. So let's accept for the purpose of this argument that it is not the changing social and political conditions that signal the shift to the exhibition as a privileged site for photographers today.

So is it that the galleries have changed? Well, yes and no. Yes, no-one is going to be turned away from a gallery because of the colour of their skin. And yes, busloads of black schoolchildren visiting public galleries are a fairly common sight. And yes, every decade since at least the sixties has witnessed a noticeable increase in the number of black artists represented in galleries; and over the last decade there has been a visible rise in the number of black curators.

I'm going to say a little more about the visibility of black artists in galleries, because I think this is a key part of what will attract black audiences. Not because all artists of a particular colour necessarily 'represent' communities of similar hue, indeed increasingly the trend for many artists of colour has been what can be termed 'African iconoclasm' – you know the argument: "Because I'm black/African the art-world expects me to carve wood so I won't, I'll play golf instead", but even these iconoclasts serve as role models for black children or youth, not least because of their success in a world hitherto closed to most people of colour. And since the legacy of group areas means that the majority of white artists are simply too removed from the everyday life of most South Africans to produce work that can engage a large black audience, it is fairly logical to perceive a relationship between those showing work and those who come to view.

I've said earlier that every decade produces more practising artists of colour. But I also suspect that in the last few years, at least in some parts of the country, opportunities for black artists to exhibit in galleries is becoming more difficult than it was in the 90s. In the late 80s and early 90s there was a great emphasis on redressing historical imbalances by ensuring inclusivity.<sup>5</sup> However, in this era of the born-free generation, with the struggle supposedly behind us, we are all apparently equal and the colour of artists is apparently irrelevant. Why then am I disturbed by what I perceive to be a disproportionate number of notices for exhibitions where black artists are noticeably under-represented, even absent. Now, I need to stress that this comment applies particularly to Cape Town, and not to every exhibition here – It doesn't apply to survey exhibitions at Iziko, such as *1910-2010: From Pierneef to Gugulective*, and it doesn't apply to The Spier Contemporary. And I sincerely hope that it is not true of Johannesburg, Durban, and other centres.

Before I get harangued for making libellous unsubstantiated claims, let me highlight a few examples. Last year the director of the AVA, Kirsty Cockerill, curated an exhibition titled *Social Pattern*. The press release links the notion of a "social pattern" that is "associated with an individual or group" with that of a "pattern in visual practices". It ends with the observation that: "... all visual patterns include not only the objects, so to speak, but the spaces in between. These spaces through omission as much as presence reflect social tendencies, conventions and customs."<sup>6</sup> What then should one make of the fact that the exhibition included the work of 14 artists, all white? What omissions are revealed and what "social tendencies, conventions and customs" does this exhibition reveal? The AVA is an extremely important site because it is one of very non-profit galleries in South Africa. As a non-profit body it can raise funds, such as the public money that was used for *Social Pattern*. In the early 90s, in its previous incarnation as the Cape Town branch of the South African Association of Arts, it proved itself to be highly responsive to the historical exclusion of black artists. If this situation is under threat, this has major consequences for black artists in this part of the world.

If we move to the other end of the market and consider the Goodman Gallery's current *Winter Show*, another set of observations can be made. The Goodman, along with the Michael Stevenson Gallery, is primarily positioned as an international gallery. Colour is not the issue in the *Winter Show*, at least not in the sense that black artists are visible on this exhibition. But you'll be hard-pressed to find amongst the "local and international artists" (their terms) a single artist who lives in Cape Town and happens to be black. Now as a business, perhaps they can do whatever the market tells them to, but is there really no artist of colour in Cape Town of an international standard? Or are they simply too removed from the 'local' scene?<sup>7</sup>

My third example is perhaps the most intriguing one because it rides on the back of the perception that Cape Town is this creative, edgy space. A week ago a young, seemingly imaginative curator organised a one-night event at the Kimberley Hotel titled *The Big Hole*. From the press release and reports it seems that 'everyone' was there, from perennial bad-boys Wayne Barker and Ed Young to big fish like William Kentridge and Marlene Dumas. This event was not only interesting because of its locale and concept, but because in this case it was put together by a Kenyan born artist and curator, Catherine Ocholla. Writing for *African Colours*, the Nairobi based pan-African website, the curator opens with the statement that "Mavericks,

provocateurs and household names in the contemporary South African artscape will take over one of Cape Town's most historical watering holes, the Kimberley Hotel ...in a madcap art exhibition, party and cultural response to the local[e] of many of Cape Town's most creative individuals." <sup>8</sup> Her article names 16 artists, all white; and only three black artists, including herself, feature in a list of 30 artists on the press release. One of these is Kiluanji Kia Henda, an Angolan photographer who has exhibited at the Venice Biennale; the other, Richard Chauke, has become a standing feature of Spier Contemporary and hails from about as far north as you can go without crossing into Zimbabwe.<sup>9</sup> What is disturbing here is the apparent lack of awareness of any black Cape Town based artists on the part of a black curator who studied at Michaelis.<sup>10</sup>

The pattern that emerges from these three examples is one in which black Cape Town based artists have been erased from exhibitions and events that purport to provide surveys of contemporary practice.<sup>11</sup> Where black artists are included in such exhibitions, chances are they live anywhere but here, or in cases such as Willie Bester and Berni Searle have established major international profiles. It is, as I've said previously, easy to curate a 'rainbow' show, but look a little closer and you'll find that young, white, relatively unknown artists are getting a lot more space than a host of black artists who have been working for decades, largely ignored by the powers in the art-world.<sup>12</sup>

These examples highlight that the art-world, or at least significant sections of it, has evaded meaningful transformation. There are signs of complacency, even smugness on the part of a new generation of curator. The doors look pretty closed if you're not inside.

So then, why are exhibitions in galleries so important for documentary photographers? Is it because of the cumulative effect of numerous "After the end of apartheid... The imperative of documenting the ills of that system had disappeared..." kind of arguments, arguments that effectively paint anyone still engaged with apartheid and its legacy through the medium of documentary photography as redundant; or is it that, at the end of the day, it's the show at MOMA that says "You've arrived"?<sup>13</sup> Or is it the commercial rewards of selling art rather than photos? Hopefully answers to these questions will come from other panel discussions at this conference, suffice to note that the contemporary gallery is an increasingly receptive space for photography.

For the second part of this presentation I want to say a little about different kinds of exhibitions, other than the dominant models. Now for some *The Big Hole* at the Kimberley Hotel may be doing exactly that, blurring the line between alcohol and art, inebriation and imagination. But I'm referring to the world excluded from such events. I am referring specifically to the poorly documented history of township-based exhibitions.<sup>14</sup> Now here we can see some change, and it's not all good. Pre-1994, if you organised an exhibition in the townships, you probably did it with no funds, and if you did it in association or in partnership with community structures and/or locally based cultural workers you could get an audience, even an enthusiastic one. You could even, as I witnessed in Nyanga East in 1992, leave a hall full of art unlocked for three weeks and suffer no losses or damage.<sup>15</sup>

Today, you have a better chance of getting funding for such projects, particularly from the various tiers of government, but can you get an audience? I'm thinking of Cape 07 where in its initial form as Trans Cape a lot was done to popularise the idea of exhibitions in multiple sites, many of them not galleries. In the end, the opening at Look Out Hill in Khayelitsha was modestly attended, it looked busier than it was because another function was happening simultaneously. After opening, attendance at this site was dismal. Last year Isibane, an artists' organisation comprising mostly artists living in Khayelitsha used the Look Out Hill venue for a very decent exhibition, which they funded themselves. Despite being from the community the majority of those who attended the opening were fellow artists, mostly from Khayelitsha and surrounds.

The problem of poor attendance of township exhibitions in the post-apartheid era goes back to the question of the segregated city. In part it testifies to the difficulty in moving the 'centre' to events on the periphery', and perhaps more importantly, also speaks to the legacy of limited art education in black communities.<sup>16</sup> To get an audience you need to get into schools, and getting into schools is easier said than done, given the poor position of art education. Here photography, documentary photography in particular, probably has more chance of attracting and engaging a 'non-art' audience.

At this point I want to highlight another kind of exhibition, one that can appeal to the youth. I'm referring to virtual exhibitions. Exhibiting online is relatively cheap and reaches a wide audience, from professionals to children. Not all schools have computers and the internet, but they're more likely to get access to this technology than they are to have a well-resourced library, or any library at all, in their communities; or an art-room in their schools. It is particularly interesting to see how a photographic festival such as Bonani appears simultaneously online. This broadens access to the event, and also serves to document it for future generations of researchers. The rationale behind putting Bonani online, and of South African History Online in general, is not that far removed from the concerns that Badsha and others had about art as an elitist discourse and practice. On SAHO art is linked to history, politics, and education. New technology is being harnessed to empower a wide audience.

In conclusion, the legacy of segregation marks the post-apartheid landscape. The visual arts, understood inclusively, will always mediate the polarity between a set of practices that affirm the status quo and those which challenge and present an alternative to it. If it becomes simply a question of appropriating the aesthetic dimensions of photography as art without taking on photography's ability to articulate critical issues of social concern, the potential for photography to broaden the audience for art will be lost.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Weinberg, Eric Miller, Gideon Mendel and Tracey Derrick also come to mind, although they have not had the same degree of 'success' in the art-world as Goldblatt et al.

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<sup>2</sup> One can also mention the increasing number of artists with digital cameras, as well as those who don't even press the button, but shamelessly take full credit as the authors of their work, regardless that the quality of the photograph is often better than the idea behind the work.

<sup>3</sup> Here I am thinking of Jon Berndt, Trish de Villiers, Stacey Stent, Gaby Cheminais and many other largely unsung heroes of resistance art.

<sup>4</sup> This was written at a time when the ruling party was proposing legislation that many perceive to be a threat to press freedom and democracy in general.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to recognise that transformation is about much more than the numerical visibility of black artists, art professionals and audiences, but also that ensuring visibility represents perhaps the first challenge that must be addressed.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.ava.co.za/docs/arc\\_exhibition.asp](http://www.ava.co.za/docs/arc_exhibition.asp)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.goodman-gallery.com/exhibitions/185>

<sup>8</sup> See Catherine Ocholla "The Big Hole' At The Kimberley Hotel"  
[http://www.africancolours.com/african-art-news/570/south%20africa/%E2%80%98the\\_big\\_hole%E2%80%99\\_at\\_the\\_kimberley\\_hotel.htm](http://www.africancolours.com/african-art-news/570/south%20africa/%E2%80%98the_big_hole%E2%80%99_at_the_kimberley_hotel.htm)

<sup>9</sup> It is not clear from reports whether these artists were present, or whether their work was simply appropriated for the event. The same applies for Dumas, who is not listed in all accounts.

<sup>10</sup> Earlier examples include *20 Prints 06* at the now defunct Bell Roberts Contemporary, curated by Norman O'Flynn in 2006, where only three of twenty artists (Ernestine White, Donovan Ward, and Sipho Hlati) were included, despite the significant number of black printmakers in the city. A few years earlier, Bruce Gordon, owner of the Joburg bar, a favourite hangout for many artists advertised his permanent art collection in *Art South Africa*, listing 15 artists, all white (*Art South Africa* vol.1 no.2, p.19). These examples may appear selective and arbitrary, but in the absence of any detailed study they influence my perception of much white practice in post-apartheid South Africa.

<sup>11</sup> I am mindful that such a statement could be interpreted as nationalistic and even xenophobic. This is clearly not my intention, and certainly the work I do with ASAI is largely centred on the need for South Africans to engage more substantially with fellow Africans. Rather my intention here is to suggest that 'other' black Africans are sometimes easier to assimilate into the white-led art-world than the troublesome 'natives', not least when their point of entry into the local art-world is through studying at University.

<sup>12</sup> One could add Zwelethu Mthethwa, except that he is seldom seen on group shows in South Africa.

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<sup>13</sup> I also want to highlight that this exclusion can in part be traced to what is perceived as 'contemporary', and what is perceived as 'outdated'. Such perceptions can be traced back to the second Johannesburg Biennale, and the rise of what Sylvester Ogbechie has dubbed as the "curatorial regime" of Okwui Enwezor. See Sylvester Ogbechie, "The Curator as Culture Broker: A Critique of the Curatorial Regime of Okwui Enwezor in the Discourse of Contemporary African Art", 2010 <https://www.asai.co.za/forum.php?id=79>

<sup>14</sup> The strategy adopted by the Gugulective, where exhibitions are held simultaneously in town and township is a novel way of addressing this problem, Interesting to note the common denominator between their favoured site in Guguletu (Kwa Mlamli) and The Big Hole – alcohol.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example. Svea Josephy "Departures" in Geoffrey Grundlingh (ed) *The Cape Town Month of Photography 2005*, The South African Centre for Photography at the University of Cape Town. While Josephy is a young commentator, who deals with the 80s in hindsight and not from the position of having been part of the 'struggle photography' she contrasts new developments against, her position as a photography lecturer at UCT puts her in an influential position.

<sup>16</sup> The Zolani Centre exhibition was part of the Visual Arts Group's *Travelling Exhibition*, 1992.