

A TIME OF RECKONING: CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN ART

*Okwui Enwezor in Conversation with
Sue Williamson*

Okwui Enwezor: As far as I can recollect, it has been some time since I encountered the idea of South Africa as a subject for a contemporary art exhibition. I think the 1990s were the height of such explorations of contemporary South African art as a topic, where South African art was being shown in different parts of the world, whether it was Ruth Rosengarten's "Don't Mess With Mr. In-between" in Lisbon as part of the Culturgest in 1996, or the 1996 exhibition "Contemporary Art from South Africa" organised in Oslo by Riksstillingen, the Norwegian touring exhibition organisation for which I wrote an essay that unintentionally turned out to be controversial. But here we are towards the end of the second decade of the 21st century, and there's this exhibition organised by Fondation Louis Vuitton. I would like to talk about your sense of where contemporary South African Art has been since the 1990s, when the initial interest on South African art globally was on such a favoured page, and why you believe that that interest waned over the last decade?

Sue Williamson: I think that interest centred on the extraordinary ending of decades of apartheid, the release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of the African National Congress in February 1990. Everyone had been certain that South Africa was destined for a bloody revolution but it didn't happen. Instead, there was a fully democratic election and the country opened up to the world. And since art and culture had played an important role in this seemingly miraculous turnaround, all those who were interested in art were fascinated with the way artists had engaged with the liberation struggle both before and after freedom. And so you had the shows that you mentioned, there was also "Liberated Voices" in New York, there was "New Identities" in Bochum, Germany, there was "Dreams and Clouds" in Stockholm, Sweden. They all looked at that moment of transformation and what had led up to it. And of course, in 1995 and 1997, we had the two remarkable Johannesburg Biennales, particularly the second one with its theme of "Trade Routes and Geography" which you directed, and which brought the art world to South Africa and provided an introduction into the international art world for so many of the country's artists.

But since then, South Africa has rather blotted its copybook. After Mandela's remarkable and conciliatory presidency, Thabo Mbeki took his place, with his denialist attitude on the devastating scourge of AIDS. Jacob Zuma followed and since then it's just been one disgraceful scandal after another, so many social problems remain, and I think the world has largely lost interest in the miracle they thought was South Africa.

OE: The world may have lost interest but South Africa is still viewed as a kind of political miracle. That image of South Africa as a rainbow nation, coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, has since frayed. The country remains as divided as ever, across race, class and culture. However, I would like to bring us back to this question of the exhibitions that celebrated the new South Africa of Mandela, many of which we didn't mention. There was the Africa 95, in 1995 in London, for which there was a particularly strong turnout of South African artists in exhibitions such as "On the Road: Ten South African Artists" at Bernard Jacobson Gallery and "Siyawela: Love, Loss, and Liberation in South African Art" by Pitika Ntuli and Colin Richards at the Arnolfini Gallery, in Bristol. There was also this exhibition, "Colors: Contemporary Art from South Africa" at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, in Berlin, which was a reference to the rainbow nation idea: would you say that the arts shared the same sense of optimism? Or is this only us imagining that politics failed but art somehow succeeded?

SW: I think perhaps that artists never had the same kind of sense of jubilation the rest of the world did. I mean, if you think of the work of Kendell Geers from that time, I think we were more ... shall I say cynical, or perhaps pragmatic. So yes, it was extraordinary that we now had a democracy, but the legacy of apartheid was so bitter, the results of centuries of colonialism were so extreme that it wasn't going to be an easy ride at all. There were exhibitions like "Scurvy" in 1995 and "Fault Lines" in 1996 at the Cape Town Castle, which brought issues like poverty, homophobia and xenophobia. Artists were not under any real illusion as to what South Africa was or is, so we just kept on working. There were so many fundamental issues which remained to be addressed. And because the art mar-

ket had never played much of a role in our lives before then, we always had this feeling that this new interest could well be one of those moments from which the world moved on, when some other country or movement made the news.

OE: You mentioned Kendell Geers, and I would like to also think about projects like yours, your own work, and of you not just as an artist but as a chronicler of some of the ideas that were already being very much explored within the artistic context, or the breach of the artistic context with the social. We have to think of an artist like David Koloane who, in the 1990s, made a series of dog paintings that have this incredible sense of disquiet to them. The pictures depicted these isolated canines in bleak landscapes. When I showed that body of work about ten years ago in Spain, in the Seville Biennial, it still struck me how powerfully those dog paintings crystallized a certain scepticism. In a sense, it brought me back to an earlier work featuring dogs made by Jo Ractliffe. So I had this feeling, if not of cynicism but of scepticism, this idea in the work of South African artists to remain true to an analytical vision of the landscape, that South Africa is such a troubled context, from its very invention to the present, that the vigilance of the arts has to somehow approach the social, political and cultural formation that is South Africa, with a sense of tactical engagement, rather than euphoric engagement, as many people around the world had done with the end of apartheid. So I just want to reflect about the 1990s, and discuss some of the things that you believe this decade was all about. There are many figures we can add to this discussion, such as Helen Sebidi, Noria Mabasa, Penny Siopis, especially her "History Painting" series, your own work on the great female figures in the South African context: there are just so many charged works produced over this period. We can add to the list the work of photographers such as Santu Mofokeng, David Goldblatt, Paul Alberts, and certainly an artist like William Kentridge working between drawing and film, and others. If we can go back to look at how the arts have engaged South Africa, what do you see as different from the engagement of your generation of artists and the generation that came right after you?

SW: I came from a generation that was largely influenced by that very important conference in Botswana in 1982, on culture and resistance, entitled "Art Toward Social Development and Change in South Africa". That conference underlined the feeling that it was our responsibility as artists to try to bring about change in some way through our work. In time, organisations were formed. There was the Artists' Alliance in Johannesburg: Penny Siopis, Colin Richards and David Koloane were an important part of that. In Cape Town we had the Visual Arts Group, which in turn was part of the Cultural

Workers' Congress. Our whole idea was "how do we democratise the arts? What do we do? How do we break down that imbalance between white and black artists? How do we bring issues of injustice to the general public? How do we share the spirit of creative action with the community at large?" That sense of social responsibility was very ingrained, and it was only really when Albie Sachs came out with his famous speech *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom*, in 1990, in which he said artists should not feel obligated to make work which engaged with social issues, that one thought "Well I see, all right, we're released from that if we wish." But it's not really as simple as that, because we still carry that sense of the necessity of holding up a mirror to society. The next generation of artists, like Stephen Hobbs and others, claimed for themselves the name *post-apartheid kids* and took the attitude that they didn't really have to adopt that social responsibility as a point of departure in their work any longer.

But I don't think it's really gone away, if you look at what the young artists today are doing, it still relates to the political. Igshaan Adams tries to illuminate for the world the complexities of his cultural hybridity as a young gay Muslim man brought up by Christian grandparents. Kemang Wa Lehulere metaphorically re-interprets social history and looks to the cultural figures in the past and how they were neglected at the time, and how they've influenced the present.

OE: You made a very interesting point, especially with regards to the Gaborone conference in 1982, which was really, in my view, one of the most unprecedented gatherings of South African cultural forces and voices, intellectuals, artists, activists, writers, composers, photographers and filmmakers all in one place to, in a sense, lay the groundwork for how one thinks of South African artistic cultures, and also to try to breach the gap between black and white artists. That has always been a very tough and unresolved tension within the South African body politic how, through the years of truth and reconciliation, South Africa can reconcile itself to the idea that there is a wide community of artists and there are black, and non-European, and non-African communities of artists. How do you think this has gone, do you think that this is a big question within the context of South Africa today or has this fallen into the background?

SW: Certainly the art community today is far more diverse and open than it was twenty years ago, with many new galleries and more opportunities for international residencies and exhibitions, but the big change in the last two years has been the rise of the #RhodesMustFall movement which started in the universities. There is a kind of new consciousness for young artists, a sense of disillusionment, a strong belief that transformation has stalled. Young people feel that their parents' generation has

let them down, that they gave in too easily, that Mandela was too focused on reconciliation rather than redress, and that Whites never really said sorry. There wasn't enough reparation at the time and now, twenty years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) attempted to address the violence of apartheid, economic power is still largely in white hands and not enough has changed. The Fallist movement has had tremendous impact throughout the country.

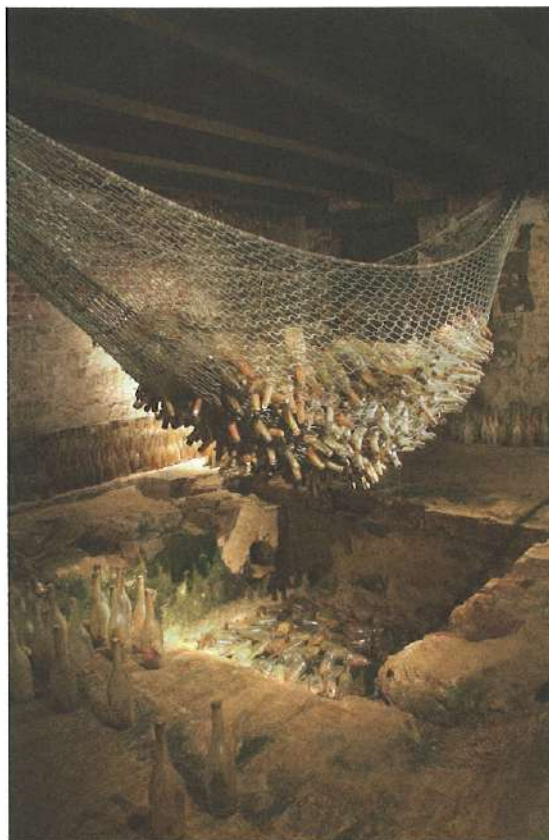
OE: We will come back to the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, to the younger generation and their expectations, the so-called born-free generation, in relation to the post-apartheid generation of Stephen Hobbs. In a sense, we have three generations that we're looking at now. What strikes me about #RhodesMustFall is the disappointment in the South African transition, especially in terms of the ability of young Africans to gain institutional access across the board in a way that penetrates into the entire population, whether it's in terms of education, health-care, arts, media, and so on. There's a belief that there was too much of reconciliation under Mandela but very little justice and accountability accompanying reconciliation. I wonder whether there is, in South African contemporary art today, a way to accompany this discussion, to re-ask the question about the South African miracle and whether the arts have sufficiently interrogated what that South African miracle was. Do you think that the arts were sufficiently engaged in terms of these questions of inequality, of disappointment with the terms of the transition?

SW: *Sufficiently engaged ...* that's a challenging question. Jane Alexander's remarkable tableau, *African Adventure*, set on red soil with a mighty figure of a labourer burdened with ancient machinery, certainly expresses a very dystopian view of this miracle. Other characters, which are half human, half animal, are scattered about, and there's a group of foreign observers in black suits. That work is now installed in the Tate Modern, in London.

Artists like Billy Mandindi, Patrick Mautloa and Willie Bester continued to make savage mixed media sculptures and installations referencing the past, lest the past be forgotten.

At the time, I made a series called "Truth Games," wall pieces with images from the media and sliding panels of textual evidence which highlighted some of most important cases that came up in front of the TRC. I was trying to see if, through this presentation of public evidence, the victim and the perpetrator were able to come to any kind of closure. In most cases, victims felt that the other side was still lying.

William Kentridge, of course, also very cogently explored this issue: dramatically and forcefully questioning the veracity of the security policemen called up in front of the TRC in his extraordinary play *Ubu and the Truth Commission*.



Sue Williamson, *Messages from the Moat*, 1997

OE: We opened the second Johannesburg Biennale with that performance and, of course, there is also your great installation *Messages from the Moat*, which sort of extends the historical chronology of the ways of rendering and accounting for truth within South African history.

SW: *Messages from the Moat* was an installation of a vast fishing net suspended above water and filled with bottles, each engraved with the name and details of one person enslaved and brought to South Africa from other countries like Java, India, other African countries in the 1650s to work for the Dutch East India Company in Cape Town. That period marked the beginning of colonialism.

OE: Well, Sue, I think we should turn to your seminal book, *Resistance Art in South Africa*¹ published in 1989, a hugely important and pivotal year not only in South Africa but across the world. This book, in many ways more than any book on South African art, remains a touchstone for how art tries to deal with social responsibility. I'm very struck by the fact that you, as an artist, had taken on the task of recording

1. Sue Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa*, Cape Town: David Phillip / London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1989.

for the historical account the place and importance of art and the work of artists, and the struggle in imagining South Africa differently. And then, twenty years later, you brought out a second book – I believe it was in 2009.

SW: Yes. The 2009 book was published by Harper Collins, New York, and was called *South African Art Now*.² There was one in between that, called *Art in South Africa: the Future Present*, which I did with Ashraf Jamal, in 1996.³

OE: So there are these three books: in the span of nearly thirty years, you've been insistently looking at South African art with such a devout and critical eye – pardon me using the term "devout". Can you talk a little bit about the links between these three books and the way the arts have changed as you've chronicled them through these three stages?

SW: Before I became an artist, I was going to be a journalist. So when I see something that I think should be of wider interest, I want to get that information out. That's really how the first book, *Resistance Art in South Africa*, started. It just seemed to me that so much was going on as a result of this wave of activism that followed the Culture and Resistance conference.

Also, in 1986, I was invited to go to New York by the Women's Caucus for Art and I gave a lecture on the role of art in the struggle for liberation. There was such a lot of interest in the subject that I felt encouraged to expand the lecture to a whole book. I remember telling the idea to a publisher, David Philip, and he just said "Ok, we'll do it." I asked him if he wanted to see a sample chapter, to which he answered "All right, but we're going to do it." So that was the beginning of it. What I wanted to demonstrate was the ethos of that time, which was that you didn't have to be an artist trained through the traditional medium of university, but that whoever you were, your creativity was important. Everybody was a creative person and you could express that creativity in many different ways. You could make a mural on a wall, design a message T-shirt, you could do graffiti, and all of these things added together had enormous impact. There was a swelling movement, of images and plays and songs, which helped to precondition people to change, in a sense. So that's what the impetus was: for the first book, I wanted to do something which was bold, bright and really featured the work I was seeing, this exciting work that was coming up – like the exhibition at the Market Theatre, "Detention Without Trial: 100 Artists Protest" in 1988. I found it very stimulating to be a part of that time.

2. Sue Williamson, *South African Art Now*, New York: Collins Design, 2009.

3. Sue Williamson, Ashraf Jamal, *Art in South Africa: the Future Present*, Cape Town: David Philip, 1996.

OE: One could say that this exhibition, "Detention Without Trial: 100 Artists Protest" at the Market Theatre, was definitely another pivotal moment, because it was done in the country. Was that the very first exhibition of that kind?

SW: There had been an earlier one at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town protesting government demolitions of squatter camps, but this was a very important one, covertly organised by Audrey Coleman and Gail Behrmann of the Detainee Parents' Support Committee, an organisation which gave aid to those whose children were in jail under the State of Emergency. Linda Givon, of the Goodman Gallery, also became involved with the organisation. But it was a very important exhibition, I think, because it was openly confrontational. Just about everybody was on it: Robert Hodgins, William Kentridge, Penny Siopis ...

OE: Were there black artists in the show?

SW: You must remember it was more difficult for black artists to participate than white because they were more vulnerable to attracting State attention. So several refused. But there was Durant Sihlali, Peter Magubane, Bongiwe Dhlomo and Ezrom Legae. And, of course, Alfred Thoba with a remarkable painting based on the Sam Nzima photograph of Hector Pieterse's body being carried by a comrade. Pieterse was the first pupil to be shot in the 1976 Soweto uprising. That was a very important painting on that show.

OE: Just to continue on *Resistance Art in South Africa*, how do you think that the historical recollection has kept up with the various sequences, chronicles of the art of the late 1980s and 1990s, and whether there are things that we haven't done enough to inscribe an understanding of, about the role that artists played in the making of the South African democracy?

SW: Up to the point when democracy came, there was this whole emphasis on change. By the time 1995 came around, which was when I started the second book, there was a shift in tone from "Let's point out the injustices in society" – whatever those might have been – to "All right, we are now in a democratic South Africa, what does that mean to me as a person and as an artist?" This became the new mantra and led to a search for identity, a positioning of the artist against his or her personal background, the past history of the country, and also as part of the new democracy.

I decided to do that second book and invited Ashraf Jamal to join me in making it when I saw the "Scurvy" exhibition at Cape Town Castle in 1995. The following year, many of the works on "Fault Lines," curated by Jane Taylor, also became part of the book. Jane Alexander had made works for that



Kendell Geers, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1993

exhibition, as well as Clive van den Berg, who recalled the painful history of what it had meant to be a homosexual in South Africa. I thought that a definite swing in emphasis had become apparent, and it was another important moment. That book came out just between the two Johannesburg Biennales.

Moving on to the third book, in 2009, twenty years after the first book ... I did that one because Harper Collins New York approached me directly. I don't enjoy writing much, I'd rather be trying to make my own work in the studio, but they produce beautiful books and this would be launched in America, so I thought it would be valuable for the artists who were in it. And of course, as you know, I invited you to write the foreword for it, an introductory essay, which was so important in framing the discourse.

OE: You've just drawn a roadmap linking these three periods, the first one, with *Resistance Art in South Africa*, has to do with the social vision of art, and the second one, which was in the immediate transformative questioning period after the end of apartheid, after the first elections in 1994, was really about an individual search of identity. The artists were now asking themselves about their individual place – not their *role* but their *place* – in the new South Africa: whether it has to do with “racial” identity, whether it's

about gender or sexuality, there are many different ways of figuring identity in the new South African dispensation. You didn't say what the third period was, but it seemed to me that there has been a shift towards the global. Here South African artists were very conscious that they wanted to be part of a larger conversation, and that conversation was about their place in the world. And it probably has to do with the fact that a number of South African artists had achieved global visibility, chief among them William Kentridge. Artists such as Kay Hassan, Kendell Geers, Candice Breitz, Robin Rhode, Moshekwa Langa – to look at the younger artists – among others, who were beginning to show outside and younger artists, like Nicholas Hlobo, who were just emerging. So what would you say distinguishes the art of the 2000s from the art of the two previous decades and, at the same time, what links that art with the art of the two previous decades?

SW: As you have observed, there was a growing desire amongst artists to be part of a global conversation rather than be identified solely with South Africa and this led to many new directions. But at the same time, I think that the concern with social issues continues. Look at the photographs of Zanele Muholi, who's been on an extraordinary mission to focus on and to highlight the precarious position of black lesbian women in South Africa. Sexual preference is protected under our constitution, which is one of the most progressive in the world, yet we still have these terrible so-called “corrective rapes” of lesbians in black communities. Many of these violent acts have ended in murder. Through her photographs showing lesbian women in ordinary domestic situations or portrayed gazing candidly into the camera, Zanele Muholi has given this community a strong and visible identity. A normality. Not only does she make this work but she also uses the money she gets from selling her works to support that community and to help to educate them, to bring her group to lectures and to openings. It's remarkable. Zanele Muholi has referred to herself as an activist, rather than a photographer. She learned her skills in the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg, which is such an important facility in training young photographers.

Nicholas Hlobo's work too refers back to history, both the country's and his own, and his personal interpretation of that history. He recently had a show at the Cape Town Stevenson, “Sewing Saw,” in which he staged a performance on opening night. A number of men sitting in long white dresses on very high chairs are stitching away at old sewing machines. Swathes of black fabric are falling from the tables to the floor. The labour of the hand has always been very present in Nicholas Hlobo's work and his statement, “This work is to deconstruct whatever I have constructed so that I get to understand the layers I might have missed in building that edifice,”



Mikhael Subotzky, *Cell 33 E2 Section (1), Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison, 2004*

is enlightening. There are also echoes of colonialism and entrapment in the work. It really was a very beautiful show.

Perhaps a distinguishing factor of South African work is it nearly always has some sort of purpose beyond just being itself.

OE: So beyond just the formal aspect of the work. Maybe in reference to Zanele Muholi, I wonder if it's possible to look a little bit back to a number of younger artists, who are certainly of her age, if not maybe of the same generation, but who came up much earlier but may no longer have as much critical visibility as her, and whose works, nevertheless, to me, were just as rigorous, critical and complex with the way in which they dealt with these topics. Here, I think specifically about artists like Peet Pienaar, Tracey Rose, and Moshekwa Langa. I think we mustn't forget that there has been this incredible stream of visionary artists, with their own individuality and ways in which they view the unique conditions of South African contexts to really create works that remain individually very important and unique – and not only just within South Africa, but within the contemporary art realm as well. I wonder if there is a kind of elision of this critical background without which Zanele Muholi's work would not have come into being. And of course, there are elements in her work that also touch on a lot of work that African artists have done, in terms of identity, maybe not necessarily in terms of transgender issues. Therefore, I wonder if there is a way to think about this generation of artists, especially in light of the fact that Candice Breitz is representing South Africa in the South African national pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale. Candice Breitz was born in the 1970s, so was Moshekwa Langa and Tracey Rose. These artists are the post-apartheid generation and I want us to dwell a little bit on that particular generation: the artists who were born right before or shortly after the Soweto Uprising, and how you think that their ideas have been situated within current discussions of South African art.

SW: I heard Peet Pienaar was in Colombia and was working with a university on urban planning issues in Medellín, so his creativity has taken a different direction, but the other artists you mention are still very much an integral part of the South African art scene. Tracey Rose continues to make videos and exhibits internationally. She is currently exhibiting on a solo show entitled "Tracey Rose: Toro Salvaje" [Savage Bull] at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires, and if I can read this to you, her installation there is described as an "analysis of the subterranean crossroads of the Argentine dictatorship's political legacy, the assassination of the architect of apartheid in Rose's native South Africa, and the collision of Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun's escape submarine with Mount Rushmore and American Gothic." So a dark tangle of references. A wooden bridge with rainbow coloured slats is one element in this installation. Tracey Rose's bold, early video performances were groundbreaking and one can clearly see their influence in the work of the younger generation of artists.

Then, Robin Rhode. He lives in Berlin and returns to show in South Africa periodically. The chalk drawings, the "wish lists" of desired objects – bicycles, cars – that he drew on township walls as a youth has led to a lifetime of sophisticated variations on this process. In many of his works, walls are used as animated backdrops for performances that draw on many sources to explore existential and universal themes.

Candice Breitz also lives in Berlin, and it was her need to move on to an art language that could be universally understood that led her to concentrate on an analysis of the impact of the global culture of popular entertainment – Hollywood movies, music stars – as source material. In Venice, her work *Love Story* will focus on the stories of six immigrants, two from Cape Town, two from Berlin and two from New York. On six screens, the participants deliver their harrowing tales directly into the camera. On a seventh screen, two international movie stars, Alec Baldwin and Julianne Moore, channel excerpts from

these stories giving the viewer a choice: to watch the person movingly telling their own story or watch the same story delivered by a popular star.

Kay Hassan has always used as a palette large scale advertising posters from the street, tearing them up to assemble his portraits and landscapes with figures. Ordinary people. He also has a fondness for ordinary objects, like discarded spectacles or old radios, collecting large masses of them for installations that speak of vanished owners.

OE: For me, I think Zanele Muholi's current project, having come out of the Market Theatre Photo Workshop, could not be possible without the work of the Afrapix group of photographers, who brought a certain kind of analytical approach to social documentary work, which is what she has taken up in terms of social portraiture.

SW: Yes, I think Zanele Muholi's no-holds-barred approach is certainly an extension of the Afrapix attitude.

OE: I'm wondering now how also the field of South African art turns its view towards photography, because photography for a long time had been one of the strongest areas within contemporary South African image production. That seems to be, in a sense, in a decline, or at least shifting elsewhere – the lens of photography is now shifting elsewhere, not so much in the context of social documentary but something entirely different. I'm thinking about artists like Pieter Hugo, Mikhael Subotzky, and of course Zanele Muholi, and I wonder if there are others we should include in this discussion.

SW: Mikhael Subotzky certainly started off his career in documentary mode, with his memorable series taken inside the Pollsmoor Prison and the Beaufort West works, which lifted the curtain on the strange and convoluted society of a small South African town, but his most recent work – I think it's still in progress – is a multi-screen video work which is a metaphorical view of society. Pieter Hugo has been working with photographing children, born post-1994, in Rwanda and South Africa against the landscapes of those countries. Haunting images. So, it's not entirely different but there has been a shift. For younger photographers, the search for a subject is challenging.

OE: Indeed it must be. With the end of apartheid, it would have appeared that a potent subject matter would disappear. But the violence done to memory persists, even in the present.

SW: To get back to that earlier generation: Moshekwa Langa is still making mesmerizing paintings and installations, often incorporating stuff like used masking tape. He started working in his mother's backyard,

in the mid-1990s, the year after he left school, tearing open discarded brown paper cement sacks into hide-like shapes, daubing them with Jeyes Fluid, Rattex⁴ and other substances, and hanging those "skins" on the washing line. It was very much about materiality, about using whatever stuff was at hand, in a way that hadn't really been explored before. In fact Sean O'Toole (cf. pp. 154-160) told me recently he had a copy of a fax between Marilyn Martin, who was director of the South African National Gallery at the time, and Moshekwa Langa. Marilyn Martin wanted to buy the work for the National Gallery and Moshekwa Langa's response was that he wasn't really sure if he was ready to sell it yet, because it helped him think about the work that he was still going to do. And it struck me that it was the most remarkable response from a young artist who really, one would have thought, would be delighted to get a piece into the collection of the National Gallery, but, no!

OE: I thought they were remarkable periods. I arrived in South Africa in the midst of such an extraordinary artistic ferment: everywhere you turned, young artists like Moshekwa Langa, Tracy Rose (who was still a student by the way) ... all of these artists were really making such incredible work! And of course, all the artists who had not really received much recognition – like Berni Searle – were yet to emerge, to become part of the conversation. There was kind of an expansion of the possibilities of that moment in the 1990s that spoke to the individual vision rather than just simply the social vision, and I think that Moshekwa Langa's response to Marilyn Martin somehow encapsulates that incredible shift, because it was not only just simply a social shift, it was also, shall we say, a psychological shift occurring. So it's really remarkable, with the works that Berni Searle did about the body, the female body, about feminism, the work that Candice did, of which I was very critical at the time – not because it was not a good work, but because I was wanting the work to also deal with its own problematics rather than simply to appropriate those problematics, and so on. And then Tracy Rose's performances and the piece she made for the second Johannesburg Biennale in "Graft" (Colin Richards's show at the National Gallery in Cape Town), and there is certainly Stephen Hobbs, who you mentioned, and there were these quite amazing things occurring during this period ... I do not believe that younger artists operating in the current moment can be properly understood if placed apart from this broadened discussion about individual identities, much in the same way that the individuality of the post-apartheid artists of Hobbs generation can be understood without some sense of the collective identity just before the end of apartheid in the 1990s. To your point about South Africa being such a rich

4. Jeyes Fluid: British brand of disinfectant for outdoor use. Rattex: rat poison.

terrain of artistic exploration, I completely agree with you, and I think one really has to connect the strands between this thirty-year period in order to have a sense of this radical difference that you ascribe to South African art. Now, I want to bring two things that link the two of us, in terms of the public presence of contemporary South African art: the year 1997, the second Johannesburg Biennale and, of course, the launch of *ArtThrob*. One could say that it was really one of the first Internet art magazines anywhere in the world. I don't know of any others that were invented then that are still in operation twenty years after, am I wrong? What made you launch *ArtThrob*?

SW: I had just finished *Art in South Africa: The Future Present* the year before, and I was approached by one of the new Internet service providers, Internet Africa, and they said: "Oh, we'd like you to do this monthly web magazine on art in this country." And the simplicity of it, just writing copy and supplying the pictures, not going through the whole large format transparency scanning and typesetting process needed for a book at that time seemed such a good idea. And because I knew that the second Biennale was just about to happen, it seemed like the ideal moment to launch it. And I had no idea, really, that it would continue this long and that it would grow to be what it is now. All the archives are still online, so it's a whole history of this period.

OE: Can you go back and describe what you set out to do with *ArtThrob*?

SW: It started out really simply. Each month, there would be reviews for the shows that were on – between one and three for each major city. We had something called an "art bio," because at that time artists didn't have all their information on the Internet as they do now, so each month we would choose one artist to profile. We would have a website of the month to try to encourage web use and link people. There was news about events or artists. Then, exhibition listings were both local and international. In 1997, if I could find four or five international shows which included South African artists, I thought I was doing well. Of course if you were to make such a list now, it would probably be almost a hundred exhibitions or more, I think.

OE: For me, what is very remarkable is not only just the way you have nurtured artists but you have also through your work as an editor and a writer nurtured writers, critics, and so on. It really situates these different strands of your practice in relation to your own work as an artist.

SW: I've sometimes felt that the writing has taken me away from the studio, but in retrospect I feel that it hasn't. It all sort of feeds back on itself. I'm always interested in the contemporary moment, whether it's

in my writing or whether it's in my work. The piece that I'm going to be showing on the Fondation Louis Vuitton exhibition is a new two-channel video work called *It's a Pleasure to Meet You*, a conversation between two young people whose fathers were shot by the apartheid police, and who are at very different points along the journey of acceptance. It is part of a series investigating the long term effects of the TRC, not only on those people who experienced the violence of apartheid and actually appeared before the TRC twenty years ago but also on their children, the generations that followed ...

OE: We've discussed about the artists who emerged during the years of apartheid, and certainly those artists figured a lot in *Resistance Art in South Africa*, and of course about the post-apartheid generation who emerged in the 1990s and figured in *South African Art Now*, your second book, and now the so-called born-free generation. I think there is something about that terminology, *born-free*, that perhaps needs further explanation. It seems that a sense of the freedom of memory from the burden of the past, from the burden of the social struggles of the previous generation has suddenly caught up with this born-free generation.

SW: You are absolutely right.

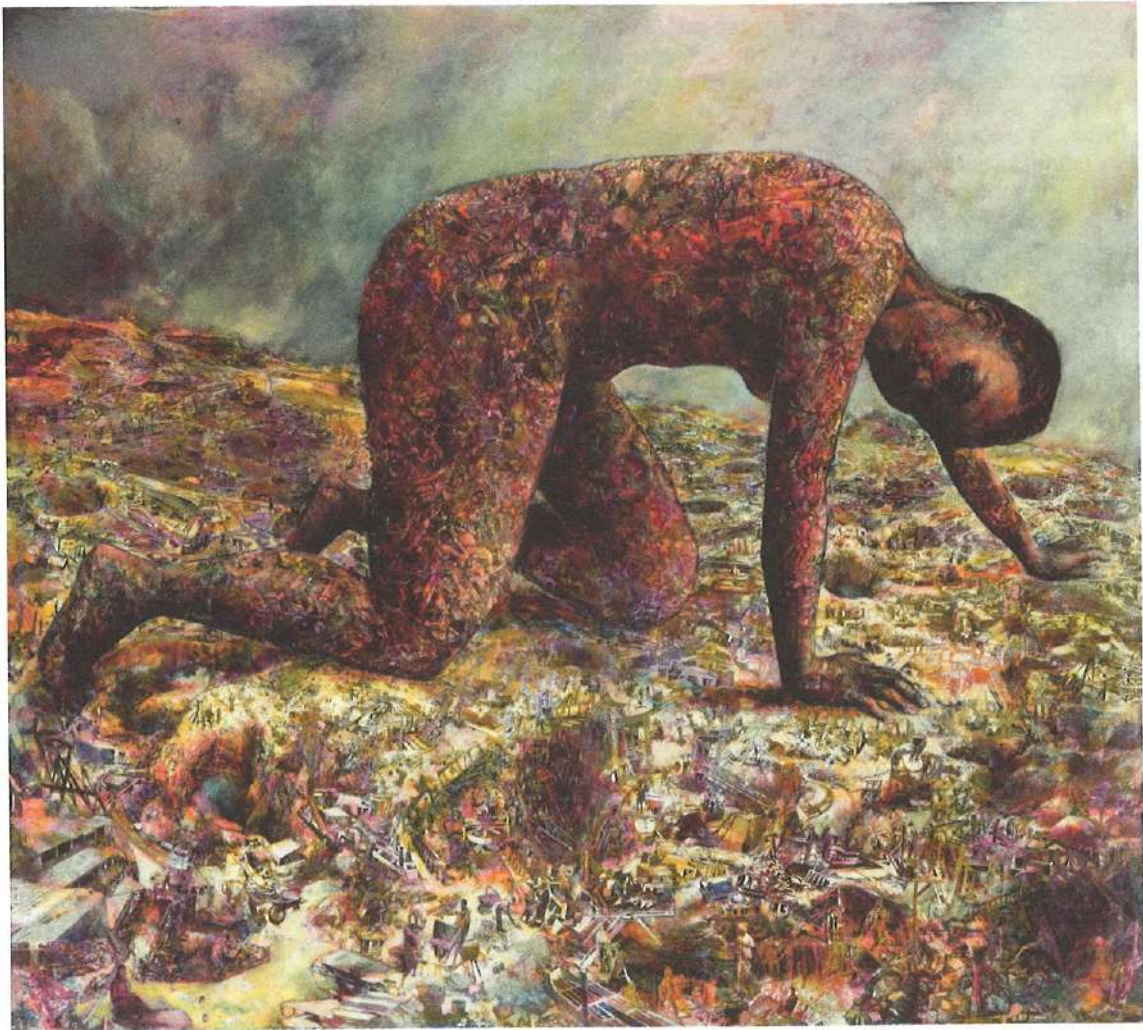
OE: And I wonder if there is any way all these ideas are figuring in the work of the generation of the *born-frees*.

SW: How this figures in the work? The term "born-free" has certainly become very contested. In a video interview I made last year, a very interesting young artist called Buhlebezwe Siwani asks "What is this thing called freedom?" In essence, she says "We're angry. Our parents were sold a lie. We don't feel we're free, what's free? Education is a basic human right but we still have to pay all this money. People talk about 'black privilege,' but black privilege does not exist."

Buhlebezwe Siwani herself is part of a strong group of young women artists called *iQhiya* who has been making performances addressing historical narratives and gender issues.

OE: Is there a way one can think of the born-free generation across all demographic segments of South Africa in terms of race, gender, ethnicity and location? Do you think there is an equal understanding of this sense of born-free between white, black and coloured artists? Or is the idea of born-free a term that is only applied to black artists?

SW: Perhaps the term born-free is associated much more with artists of colour, but it can also be seen as a generational term, simply describing those born after the ending of apartheid.



Penny Siopis, *Terra Incognita*, 1991

OE: I wonder though whether there are other ways we can explore the term further, beyond the idea of race – whether it could be possible that there is a shared understanding of the notion across this South African generation, in terms of its meaning through the burden of the apartheid state and the burden of the memory of apartheid which has not disappeared. Because if it's applied only to black artists, it seems that both “generations” are simply locked in this zone that they cannot really escape: one which is fixed on the search for equality and one which is fixed on maintaining its privilege. So in a sense, the kind of shared historical moment of being freed of the social structures that the parents of this generation emerged from might not be like a connecting thread? I was just wondering whether there is something to discuss there, about this fixedness on privilege and, on the other side, on the lack of privilege, on the demand for access.

SW: I do think that the shared historical moment of being freed from the yoke of apartheid is a powerful

connector, but the extent to which this is true can vary enormously from community to community and is very often subject to economic circumstances. Black students struggling to find cash to buy a simple meal and having to sleep in the university toilets because the student loan which would have paid for their accommodation has not come through are clearly going to resent white students driving their own cars on and off campus. It is difficult to focus on the shared historical moment when you are undergoing these hardships.

OE: But they are now clearly living within the context of many cultural and social disparities that their parents may have related to them, and so maybe many of these artists and members of their generation are really properly reinvestigating what South African citizenship as such might mean, if it is the case that many of these battles that they believe in were part of the past are still very much part of the present, such as lack of access to proper education,

lack of access to proper housing, to health care, and so on. South Africa is a kind of microcosm of bigger discussions, globally, about the conditions of inequality. Except in South Africa it was one that was pre-written in the very foundation of the country, and I wonder if the artists are looking at themselves only within the specific context of South Africa or if there has been an extrapolation of the South African condition to a larger global context.

SW: I think perhaps they look at it more in the terms of a South African context. For the majority of young black people, trying to make their way in the world, the inequalities are extreme, and progress is an ongoing struggle.

OE: I think this is a very remarkable moment because #RhodesMustFall seems to me to touch on a number of ideas and questions that have also been part of your own work, especially with this statue of Cecil Rhodes at University of Cape Town. I'm interested in the link, the oppressive presence of the past in current lives and that relationship to your work, if we think about *Messages from the Moat* and the work you have done around the TRC for example, and how you bring the issues of apartheid, colonialism, and slavery together. Now, the figure of the Rhodes statue in the university seems to be in many ways an oppressive reminder of the past, of a figure that is not to be admired, but one that many people feel should have been toppled and become a part of the ash heap of history, if you will. I wonder if universities like the University of Cape Town, and maybe other places, never really thought about how the presence of these symbols of inequality, of repression and oppression, in the public lives of black students, might not be seen as a provocation, a form of the negation of their newly found voices.

SW: That statue should have been removed from its central position on campus years ago. And it's not just the statue of Rhodes, of course, it's the portraits of all the white administrators which hang in the halls, it is the fact that the curriculum still does not deal with African history and African culture in any depth – that it is still so Euro-centric. It's hardly changed since the days of apartheid, and it's not what the students want to study anymore. Also, it shows that there are too many white professors and not enough black ones.

OE: This seems like a really interesting moment because it's very different from, say, the revolt of the students in June 1976.

SW: Oh, very different.

OE: So it has really a lot to do with the future of South Africa and how knowledge is also constructed and who has access to knowledge. This could have a very far-reaching effect on South Africa, it's a remarkable thing what this generation of students are driving at, don't you think?

SW: I hope that it is going to shape a new, more dynamic future, a more reasonable, a more sharing education system for them, I really do.

I just want to put in one comment here. David Goldblatt has made the most remarkable photo of the moment when Rhodes's statue was being removed from the university campus. All the students standing around watching, with their arms raised. But their arms are not raised in a power salute, they are all holding their cell phones up, photographing this moment (cf. pp. 64-65).

OE: I think it's very interesting, because this image you have just described is very interesting and powerful, which reminds me of another one that I witnessed when I first came to South Africa, or during the time when I was living there. This is a footage in the South African Parliament in Cape Town where black workers, I believe in either blue or green overalls with white gloves, on ladders, were slowly taking down the portraits of all the white heads of the parliament and carefully putting them aside ... It's such a remarkable image. There was a sense of a solemnity to it all, almost like a performance, that makes one feel as if it's a religious ritual, or a secular ritual to deconsecrate a space, to free a space of its ghosts and monsters and so on. And I'm by no means saying that those figures are monsters, whichever term we use, that is par for the course.

It seems to me that that ritual removal of the portraits from the National Parliament is almost akin to what you just described about the removal of this statue of Rhodes and the solemnity that kind of accompanied that, and the students with their cell phones sort of ... bearing witness to that. That really is a very powerful image.

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BEING THERE

*South Africa,
a Contemporary Art Scene*

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**BEING THERE. SOUTH AFRICA,
A CONTEMPORARY SCENE**

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