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Truth and Consequences:
Art in Response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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As citizens of the 'new' South Africa, we cannot afford to invest in placebo cures to the past. We need to explore our consciences and our complicity with recent history, deconstructing the legacies of apartheid. This cannot only happen 'officially' as it is currently through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; it is an invested process which involves the individual and needs to be enacted on many levels as part of the process of establishing a way forward and recognising that the future is complex, en-grained and marked with the traces of the past, the resonance of process.
- Artists' Statement, Fernando Alvim, Carlos Garaicoa, Gavin Younge, Memorias Intimas Marcus

Artistic and cultural concerns in many ways engage with, yet are distinct from the legal-political questions that will arise. Betrayal, sadism, mourning, loss, confession, memory, reparation, longing, these are the persistent themes of the arts. The Commission will be examining the legal and political implications of these same themes. Through the arts we can explore who we are, and why we do what we do to one another. (Fault Lines exhibition press release)

HWS 269

The above statements suggest that the TRC and art-making in response to the TRC are somehow distinct, yet interdependent processes. These were statements made to reflect the motivations behind two particular art exhibitions created in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). *Fault Lines*, a series of cultural responses to the Truth Commission explored a range of themes including truth, memory, history, culpability, and narrative. *Memorias Intimas Marcus* addressed itself to a story not told in the TRC, that of the Angolan war experience. These exhibitions were only two of several such works. In addition, plays such as *No. 4, Ubu and the Truth Commission*, and *A Story I am About to Tell* and visual art exhibits such as Judith Mason's *Requiem*, Sue Williamson's *Truth Games* and Kim Berman's upcoming *Landscapes of the Truth Commission*, all attempt to process and project the personal accounts of suffering heard at the Truth Commission outside of the Truth Commission venues and media reportage.

To say that the TRC and art about the TRC are interdependent, as in the quotations above, suggests more than a one-way relationship whereby the TRC provides the content of the art, but rather that the processes of truth-telling and its aesthetic realization through artistic practice are both necessary to carry out the promises of the TRC's nation-building agenda. In the opinion of these artists, then, art such as *Memorias Intimas Marcus* and the works exhibited at *Fault Lines* are not mere representations of the TRC or its subject matter,

but instead are *performative* in the sense that they constitute an action that brings about an effect. Many of these works actively explore emotional and psychological responses to the deeds of the past with the intended effect of causing the viewer to undergo the same exploration (see White 1987:39).

By performing these explorations, art takes up a particular tension within the TRC, that of collectivizing individual memories. The TRC has sanctified these memories as public knowledge and some of the artists, such as the Judith Mason's and Nan Hamilton's work, have "repersonalized" them. As the artists' statements above suggest, repersonalization is a necessary step in the process of the societal transformation towards a human rights culture which the TRC aims to achieve.

The difficulty arises while trying to assess what happens to truth in this process. Beyond even the TRC, institutions such as schools and museums have concerned themselves with reclaiming the truth of history. Truth claims the highest value, but facts themselves do not carry the full weight of truth. How is one history book to be valued over another? This is why the public spectacle of the TRC ingrained in people's memories is so important. Those who did not themselves suffer gross human rights violation do not have recourse to these events through their own memory. Their memory only leads them as far as the spectacle of narration at the TRC. Survivors may remember the events, but the broader public remembers the faces and voices of these survivors of brutal violence as they told their stories

before the nation and the world. Whatever truth may be claimed lies as much in the fact that these stories were told than in what they told.

What happens to this truth when artists repersonalize TRC stories, stories that they have not lived themselves? The earliest artistic works on the subject of the Truth Commission were the theatre pieces *Ubu and the Truth Commission* and *A Story I am About to Tell*. In each of these works a sharp distinction was drawn between "truth" and "theatre". In *Ubu* puppets delivered TRC testimony as direct proxies. They were not people so they could not "repersonalize" the story. The creators of *Ubu* were well aware that using puppets saved the audience from having to believe an actor was telling a true story about herself. It was clear that the words did not belong to the puppet.

By contrast, *A Story I am About to Tell* used three actual witnesses from the Truth Commission retelling their own stories on stage. But both *Ubu* and *Story* can be felt to have the same aim: they did not want to compromise the truth of the stories they were re-presenting in the context of the otherwise fictional space known as theatre. In addition to their hesitations in using actors to deliver testimony, the playwrights were also careful to script the testimony scenes as separate from, rather than part of, the plot. Scenes of testimony interrupt and suspend the stage action, and the audience recognizes the stage configuration as that belonging to the Truth Commission. The "theatre" resumes once the testimony is finished. Hayden White

maintains that a narrative is taken to be true the more closely it resembles the events it is narrating (1987: 27). Since the events are only accessible through their narration, then preserving the narration is an integral component to preserving the truth. Both of these plays seem to express and uneasiness about presenting narrated "truth" from the TRC in a theatrical context. To allay this tension, both remained true to the performance of *telling the truth*.

Other artistic works in response to the Truth Commission depart from re-presenting the testimonial accounts literally but nevertheless retain their presence in some form. In an exhibition of Judith Mason's work, which is full of evocative images *inspired by two newsclippings penned by Antjie Krog*, the two newspaper clippings containing quotes from the testimony of perpetrators during exhumations hang on the wall. The text of the testimony is still present and makes itself felt as a separate entity. Everywhere in the actual works on display, however, hundreds of quotations from authors and politicians, South African and international, any source but the TRC testimony itself become sinews and filaments written out arduously by hand on strips and sheets of plastic. And on the centerpiece, a gown constructed of blue plastic bags of the kind "the woman who kept silent" as Mason calls her, Mason pens a tribute in her own words. This series actually expresses both a personal process of coming to terms and of paying homage.

Sue Williamson's exhibition *Truth Games* retains grossly fragmented and dissected text from the TRC hearings arranged on sliding panels with photographic images that viewers can manipulate themselves as a demonstration of the multiple version of truth being produced at the TRC and the people's lives and deaths caught in between.

Sue Williamson's exhibition *Truth Games* and Nan Hamilton's site-specific theatre work, *No. 4* begin to blur these lines between using testimony as a means of retaining truth value and repersonalizing truth. Both incorporate literal excerpts of TRC testimony but add the artist's or the audience's agency to the production of truth. In Sue Williamson's work the audience could manipulate multiple versions of truth. In the "Domestic Court" scene of Hamilton's *No. 4*, testimony from the TRC was transcribed and then workshopped with the actress to generate associations from her own personal history to construct her re-performance of this testimony. For the different reasons I have named, these pieces would qualify as what Andre Brink sees as necessary in "post-apartheid narrative". Like Sue Williamson, Brink sees the need to acknowledge multiple versions of truth. For Brink multiple truths stem from the unreliability of memory. Williamson's work goes further in demonstrating the active role of the viewer/receiver in the creation of truth. Brink emphasizes that "if stories offer several versions of history, that is, of 'given' events (even though, of course, ultimate nothing is ever 'given'), the imperative of choice is even more

urgent, and certainly more richly textured and more rewarding" (1998: 41). Brink is careful to say that choice is so important not because historical events may never have happened, but after Derrida and Hayden White, that they cannot escape their condition of narrativity.

Brink cannot quite bring together his two statements about the importance of choice and the existence of historical facts, however. They seem almost to contradict one another. This is because Brink sees the TRC as an essentially fact-finding enterprise as opposed to fiction, which is an enterprise of the imagination (1998: 30). However, as I have emphasized earlier, in speaking about artistic works constituting a re-performance of the TRC, the facts cannot be divorced from the performance of public testimony.

Performing the past/ telling the truth

The TRC, as a national ritual, has profiled itself as a performance model for narrating the past. In Argentina, the Truth Commission took place behind closed doors. It is not surprising, then, that post-dictatorship "theatre of conscience" (Maree 1998: 24) in Argentina does not include performances of testimony, but instead still re-performs acts of violence in order to highlight past injustices to help build a new future through the spectacle of re-enactment. In South Africa, by contrast, the TRC has inserted itself into the chain of performances about the past. Just before the TRC had pervaded the consciousness of South

African citizens, there had been theatre works such as Andre Brink's *Die Jogger, The Biko Project* and *Maria-Maria* which told stories or detention and torture through re-ennactment (Maree 1998: 27). During and post-TRC, people feel in a different place, they are consciously looking back from the present rather than revisiting the past. They are narrating memory or reacting emotionally to the narrated memories of others.

The TRC performance model prescribes that people tell stories from their own experience. Using Richard Schechner's notion of performance as restored behaviour, the artistic works I am discussing may be seen as the restored behaviour of telling traumatic stories which takes place at the TRC. In Schechner's rubric however, much as we have discussed in terms of Brink, White and Derrida, the TRC itself is also a performance.

The TRC exhibits the restoration of several behaviors: that of storytelling, testimony, the courtroom, the church, and --in its subject matter -- of some of the violent acts committed under apartheid, here restored in narrated form. What the TRC is restoring is not facts, but previous performances with the effects that they produce. For example, the TRC helps to produce the atmosphere of forgiveness by often invoking religious symbolism, singing hymns and by soliciting confession. Superimposed upon this, however, is the semblance of a legal hearing designed to bring about an amnesty judgement based on loosely legislated concepts such as political motivation and full disclosure but which are difficult to determine on a purely

objective basis. Restoring the behavior of storytelling or oral history intends educational purposes. And in her recent book, *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler argues that speech carries action, not just meaning and that speech describing or threatening violent acts on some level actually performs those acts. (I have discussed this in detail in another paper and so will not do so here [Marlin-Curiel unpub 1999]). All of these performances are distilled into the Truth Commission. Using a performance model instead of a semiotic model focuses our attention on actions and their outcomes rather than on their signs and their referents.

A performance model also results in the by now infamous search for origins or the elusive "true event". Performance theorists such as Schechner and Butler have emphasized that performance is always a repetition of another performance. They further claim, however, that each repetition produces a difference, that a behavior can never be behaved exactly the same way twice (add refs). This is on the one hand presented as an unavoidable condition. On the other, the possibility of shifting meanings by purposely presenting events in a different form is the very potential that performers exploit to support their intentions. In a performance both intended and unintended meanings are produced. The point is that performance is always motivated by the intention to produce certain effects. Performances, which are repetitions of previous performances carry with them the intentions and effects of those performances

and it depends on conditions and contingencies under which an act is performed that determines whether any of those intentions and effects manifest.

Testimony is such a performance where the intention to tell the truth and the effect that its truth be accepted is all-important. As I hope I have made clear by the previous discussion of the TRC as a performance model that the artistic works discussed in this paper are not about representing historical events but testifying to them. The TRC as a public performance has inserted itself in the chain of performing the past. Testimony is a performance that carries the intention of truth telling and with the effect that the testimony is accepted as truth. This is very different from focusing on the foreclosed inability for the words spoken to achieve a direct representation of the true event. Because of the association of these works of art with the TRC and their reference to incidents revealed through the TRC, the viewer will expect that the art adhere to truth by re-performing the action of testimony. The audience or spectators will be evaluating the work of art for its truth-value as much as for its imaginative worth. This is because testimony is the type of performative speech act which depends upon the acceptance of its meaning by the recipient.

J.L. Austin describes a performative speech act as one which "does something" through its very utterance. There are certain conditions that must be met, however. In many instances,

certain thoughts and feelings must accompany the act or reciprocal actions must be performed. A bet must be accepted, for example. A gift must be received. If these conditions are not met, the performative is "unhappy"; in other words, the utterance fails to "perform" whatever function it was meant to have. Testimony is such a speech act. According to Shoshana Felman, testimony is a speech act, whose verbal utterance serves as material evidence for truth (add ref). When testimony is used as means of learning the truth, the truth must be accepted usually by an institution such as the TRC, which acts on behalf of the broader audience.

When faced with performative repetitions of the TRC in artistic works, then, the truth that the audience seeks is a recognition of one of the intended or unintended results of the performance of testimony at the TRC. Like the TRC, art about the TRC should in some way provoke a coming to terms with the events of the past. It is therefore terribly important that that these events be thought to have actually happened even if we can never hope to know exactly what happened. Even if memory cannot be relied upon as a source of fact, memory does at least serve as evidence that something happened. As a means of completing, supplementing or repeating the work of the TRC, art must engage memory and testimony, which make up the core of the TRC. The goal of art in response to the TRC, according to the quotations cited at the top of this paper, is to provoke spectators to explore their own emotions and consciences in relation to the past. A

work of art that already constitutes a performance of such a personal process of testifying to one's own trauma is better equipped to provoke a repetition of such a process.

Thus far I have argued that the TRC is a performance of truth telling. Art about the TRC aims, as is evidenced by the artist's statements, to supplement the TRC process. Its aims are therefore performative rather than representational. As a re-performance of the TRC's performance its primary identification as such depends upon its engagement with the testimonial act. Testimony is defined by narrating a true story from one's own remembered experience. As an act of telling the truth, testimony is accepted as true unless something carrying the same weight of truth such as another testimony contradicts it. The reason testimony is solicited is that the witness is thought to have first-hand knowledge which is more difficult to contradict than a list of facts from some other source either written or provided by someone who has not sworn to tell the truth. When lawyers listen to testimony, it is as vital to their proceedings that not only the facts be verified but that the witness has first-hand knowledge giving them the "authority or authenticity" to speak. What remains to be discussed in this paper are the implications of private memory becoming public and being retold through a voice without the "authority" to speak. Secondly, in light of this, we need to ask whether there is still a line to be drawn between truth and fiction, between art and reality.

Narrative process and the aesthetics of metaphor

Except in the case of *A Story I am About to Tell*, the fact that the artists have not themselves suffered gross human rights violations in some cases has caused tremendous outcry. At *Memorias Intimas Marcus*, Cape artist Tyrone Appollis directly challenged the artists to the point of violence. The issue of black representation by white artists has been raised in connection with theatre makers such as Brett Bailey and Robyn Orlin who have been accused of appropriating black imagery and myth for their iconographic spiritual capital (see Mail and Guardian date??). This is the same debate raised in connection with art based on traumatic experience. Does the non-trauma survivor or non-black portrayer of traumatic or black images (without making a direct equivalency) have the ability, or more importantly the authority, to create these images? Does their art have any testimonial or truth-value? Truth is not generally thought of as a primary criterion for assessing a work of art. Could it be that truth, as tied to memory, becomes a requirement in assessing works of art dealing with subjects of painful history? How can collective memory retain the truth of personal memory?

Art inspired by TRC testimony generates that same kind of sensitivities as art on the Holocaust. Adorno's injunction that no poetry be written after the Holocaust (add ref) hangs in the air with a silent weight around discussions of the Holocaust and

representation. Many scholars have pronounced the Holocaust as unspeakable and unrepresentable. When they say this they mean that the Holocaust is even less accessible through aesthetic means than it is in fact. Thus the recent criticisms of Roberto Begnini's *Life is Beautiful* as being too much a fiction with no basis in fact. Paul Lanzmann's approach in his, *Shoah*, was to gather Holocaust survivors and filmed interviews with them. There are hardly any images other than the witnesses, and no narrative, just testimony. Lanzmann's opinion of Spielberg's Schindler's List is that it transgresses the ethics of unrepresentability. "Fiction," he says, "is a transgression" (Kearney 1999: 28).

Of course, the TRC has well demonstrated that the horrors of apartheid are not unspeakable, but perhaps they are in unspeakable in any other terms but testimonial ones. What does it mean to treat atrocity by fictionalizing it through the addition of the imagination, aestheticizing it though use of metaphor, or narrativizing it by making comprehensible?

Some of these processes are already at work in the TRC. Njabulo Ndebele has called the TRC an example of a people reinventing themselves through narrative (1998: 27).

> The narrative of apartheid, which can now be told, has reached that part of the plot where vital facts leading to the emergence of understanding are in the process of being revealed...it is going to be the search for meanings that may trigger off more narratives. If and when that happens, the imagination, having been rescued by time, will be the chief beneficiary. The resulting narratives have less and less to do with facts themselves and with their recall than with the revelation of meaning through the imaginative combination of

> those facts. At that point, facts will be the building blocks of metaphor (1998:27).

In other words, Ndebele seems to be saying that at the moment of making meaning through narrative, the facts immediately disappear into the recesses of metaphor.

This is evident in the way the TRC selects particular testimonies, briefs witnesses and then poses a specific set of questions so that it can construct certain narratives, certain truths. For example, with the testimony of Ellen Kuzwayo, author of *Call Me Woman*, the Commissioners posed a host of questions about the role of community struggle in Soweto just before the uprising in 1976. As an emblem of the struggle, Kuzwayo was considered an authoritative source to speak on behalf of the community. Belinda Bozzoli (1998) makes a similar point in analyzing the hearings in Alexandra and how the testimonies were shaped to reinforce the historical identity of the community. Other testimonies were used to create images of mutilated bodies, and others for the images of mothers and lost children.

The media has often remarked upon the TRC's theatrical qualities. In talking to artists about why there is not more art about the Truth Commission the frequent answer is that the Truth Commission is already so dramatic, it defies further dramatization. These expressions of the absolute extraordinary echo Njabulo Ndebele's (1991) words about the "Rediscovery of the Ordinary": the everyday lives of blacks under apartheid, just like these stories of outrageous torture and killing, are already

beyond what the imagination could dream up. This may be a reason why testimony or autobiography is generally preferred as a mode of expression for people who suffered either the absurdities of everyday life or gross human rights violations under apartheid.

But there are two points that need to be made here. One is that even testimony, as narrative, includes an element of aestheticization. For Bakthin, to hold a vision of a separation between art and reality is already to have aestheticized reality since it has become subject to perception (1990: 276). In the terms in which I was discussing earlier being able to describe reality, for example, in narrative form is already to have perceived and shaped it. This is what Derrida and Adorno mean by aestheticization and it is the sense in which I use it here (Menke? :227). According to Derrida and Adorno, the fact of this aestheticization of reality subverts reality's capacity to be understood non-aesthetically.

It is even possible to say that aestheticization of experience already occurs at the level of the speaker in the process of testifying to individual experience as a means of speaking on behalf of others. Testimony is often offered as a means of representing a collective voice against an oppressive established system as in the Latin American model. At the TRC, testimony is on the one hand an emphatic voice of the newly legitimized individual citizen as much as it becomes a symbolic collective representation of suffering.

The aesthetic and non-aesthetic stances even emerge, as Diana Taylor observes, in the *testimonios* of post-Dirty War Argentina. Alicia Portnoy's *testimonio* to the torture she and others suffered displays what Taylor calls *doubling*. Portnoy refers to herself sometimes in the first person and sometimes in the third person. The distancing that the third person or what we might call an aesthetic stance is a means of survival. She situates herself outside her own experience (1997: 171). She is first her own audience and must translate her experience to herself through language. As Kali Tal notes, "Traumatic experience catalyzes a transformation of meaning in the signs individuals use to represent their experiences...as it is spoken by survivors, the traumatic experience is reinscribed as metaphor (1996: 16).

In the TRC another kind of doubling occurs in the body of "the nation" undergoing this process. There is an inherent split between victims and non-victims. There are those who are outside the experience of gross human rights violations (although implicated within it by their very position of being on the outside). If both the TRC and art about the TRC are to fulfill the injunction of testimony, it must intend to convey a story of injustice and suffering to those who were directly or indirectly responsible or to those in power to change the system. It is in fact the people outside their experience, then, that are the intended audience.

If the spectator/listeners are outside the experience, then it will require a metaphorical imagining on the part of the audience in order to receive the material. Rather than a process or recognition of self-revelation it will be one of trying to imagine oneself as the other as either perpetrator or victim in the story. According to Tal, if the listener has suffered a similar experience, then the narration might trigger visceral memories from their own experience (1996: 16). Tal is speaking of literature by trauma survivors but the same could be said of spoken testimony:

> Survivors have the metaphorical tools to interpret representations of trauma similar to their own. The representations may trigger "flashbacks" in the survivor-reader. However, the reexperience of trauma in the reader will always be derived from the reader's own traumatic experience rather than the survivor-author's (1996: 16).

As discussed earlier, the process of narration through testimony already places the testimony on the level of metaphor and Tal here points out that for survivor-readers (or listeners), reception is also metaphorical. Thus from the vantage point of the viewer, there should be little difference between the testimony of a survivor of trauma and that of a non-survivor since both must be understood on the level of metaphor.

Yet, on several occasions, discomfort has been expressed over what seems to some as a denial of memory and truth. Nan Hamilton's *No. 4* and Judith Mason's *Requiem* received different kinds of criticism from the *Memorias Intimas Marcus* exhibition where the artists were being accused of representing something

they did not know anything about. Judith Mason, whose exhibition opened at a gallery in Wynberg outside of Cape Town, received hate letters from some right wing Afrikaners who were horrified that she was giving so much credibility and empathy to the motives of Truth Commission which they deemed was nothing but a witch hunt. Nan Hamilton, on the other hand, was criticized for not telling the stories of people who had been held in the Johannesburg Fort, where the piece was performed. In Judith Mason's case, although she was English, it was as if her identity as a white South African should have dictated her response. To her critics, she was clearly speaking for the wrong side. They could accept this kind of reverence perhaps coming from a black but not from a white. In Nan Hamilton's case, the Fort as a place of history that had its own story to tell was being denied its own authorship. Neither Judith Mason nor Nan Hamilton in their critics eyes could be the authors of the stories they were telling. The audience experienced a confusion over authorship since the Fort competed too much with the non-Fort related histories being told there. Judith Mason's sympathy for the subjects of her art competed with the stories of those subjects themselves and with her presumed identity as being one of the "beneficiaries" of the system which caused their deaths. A similar criticism has been made of Antjie Krog, where in her book *Country of My Skull*, her own suffering and distress while reporting on the victims hearings seemed to overshadow that of the victims themselves (Braude? M&G 1998?).

Moral authority and the author

Where witnesses may have motivation to lie, as in the case of the amnesty hearings, the authority to speak is unchallenged by the audience. There would be no cause to question whether or not a person has the authority to tell a lie since it holds the lowest moral value. The truth, however, holds too much moral capital to allow access to just anyone, especially when moral capital has the chance of turning into real capital or when it is being claimed by those who are perceived as less deserving of moral highground.

What are we to understand, then, by the term collective memory? Does it have truth-value? Is it truly communal property? According to Foucault, an author is merely a means by which a piece of writing or artwork can be ascribed value and enter into circulation (1984:?). The same may be said of the label of truth as we have seen it to be contingent upon the possibility of assigning an author -- but an authentic author, one who has experienced the non-aesthetic version of their aesthetic object. Since the TRC "authorizes" the truth of the testimonies, it potentially becomes the author in the sense that it is "testimonies from the TRC" that are circulated and exchanged.

The TRC may be accepted as an author as well as the individual victims themselves, but what of the non-TRC witness, the non-survivor of trauma? Is there a story -- is there a truth

-- to be told in not surviving trauma, or of surviving, as Dori Laub would say, the trauma of listening (1992: 57-58)? Can this type of testimony be accorded equal moral value to the survivor's testimony?

As Hayden White notes, inherent in historical events is a contest of memory, an inherent drama, a struggle for truth. As a moral principle is so often the guidepost of any narration, the narrator must be thought to hold moral authority (1987: 21). In South Africa where artists and citizens are dealing with the enigma of reconciliation and restorative justice in place of retributive justice, ethics and historical truth are vital to the cause of transformation. The TRC seeks to write and then close the book on the past. It creates a moral narrative of the transition from an unjust to a just society, where the previously silenced now speak. The protagonists of the TRC's moral narrative are the survivors, the ones who speak the truth, the possessors of memory. Perhaps at the end of the process the TRC will succeed in creating moral equality for all, a blank slate. At this stage, however, relinquishing of moral authority, and of the truth of memory, to non-survivors, even artists, amounts to a relinquishing of authorship. Without an author, the narrative may not be written at all.

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