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[RE]FORMING THE PAST: SOUTH AFRICAN ART BOUND TO APARTHEID

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is recognised as being a distinguishing 'landmark' of the new South Africa. It has opened up a space, within and beyond its terrain, for South Africans to face their history. Similarly certain art is becoming recognised as carrying a distinguishing South African post-apartheid 'mark'. This socio-political art parallels features and aims of the TRC process and allows art to encompass a function beyond the confines of art-object production into the wider role of negotiating social understanding and personal ethics.

I want to illustrate this by looking at two directions evident in art exhibitions since 1994. Both these directions contain elements of the process of social catharsis seen within the workings of the TRC. Both echo the TRC's uncovering of hidden events, and exploration of power relations in apartheid's history. Like the TRC, this art negotiates a process of memory and healing through the communication of personal experience of loss and pain in counteraction to the more comfortable options of amnesia or denial.

The first phenomenon is the reappearance, the resurrection, in the very changed political dynamics of today, of certain protest art produced during apartheid. The very notion of the political changes when this work is [re]exposed and [re]claimed in the post-apartheid context with new meaning and refocused depth and understanding.

However, protest art, in its definition of resistance to apartheid, no longer exists in this post-apartheid moment. Thus the second development is socio-political post-apartheid art, made since the elections which, in a similar way to protest art, addresses the apartheid thematic but functions and is received differently.

I want to draw attention to certain aspects of protest art before discussing actual works that were, so to speak, 'locked into apartheid' and are now 'released' through recent

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[re]exposure. Protest art linked in a particular, even though small, way to the general struggle against apartheid. For its practitioners, it was, as Paul Stopforth notes, "as much an attempt to survive with decency as a determination to bear witness" (Rand Daily Mail 1983:n.p.). Protest art's overtly political subject-matter was drawn from the very local and specific incidences of apartheid.[1]

My research has concentrated on the artists Paul Stopforth and Gavin Younge and on my own work, therefore many of my examples come from these artists. Both Stopforth and Younge are generally recognised as being among the first protest artists in South Africa, their use of this form dating from the late-1960s. We were all at different times both protest artists as well as political activists.

Closely attuned to current political issues, protest artists focused on concerns, in some circumstances even before actual political action had formed or gained momentum. I identify in this regard the works by Younge protesting militarisation and conscription produced in 1981, three years before the formation of the End Conscription Campaign. Using images from the Sharpeville massacre, Stopforth in 1974 forewarned of the deaths in Soweto two years later. My own work representing Ferdi Barnard, the assassin of David Webster, was made five years before he was convicted of the murder. Thus, intimately woven into our social and political history, this art form has an important place in contemporary South African art history.

However, this status was not easily acknowledged. From its inception, protest art ran a course of rejection or at best critical ambivalence. The art-world, as many other sectors of society, carried the effects of neo-colonialism, though masked by a liberal façade that enabled those within the art-world to uphold an elitist non-involvement in the horrific political happenings of the time. The choice to use art to protest apartheid was made despite considerable objection, right up to the 1980s, that art could not and should not confront political issues.

For instance, Judge Kowie Marais, a liberal leader within the Progressive Party (later to become the Democratic Party) also President of the South African Association of Art, in

1 Here I am using the term protest art in a narrow sense to designate fine art in contrast to informative popular art such as posters or the allusively political art of the late-1980s.

1975 warned artists against "anti-South African activities" (1977:3), of being branded enemies of society, that by making political statements, the artist

> must account to himself (sic) for his divided loyalty: he should weigh up as realistically as he can the harm his political stand might do to the contemporary cause of the arts as a whole as against the 'good' he sets out to achieve by denouncing injustice in society and even resorting to subversion of the existing order. (1977:3)

Although not always recognised or acknowledged, in this politically-fraught time all artistic practice as well as its reception carried an unavoidable political positionality.

Stopforth's protest art has been [re]exhibited and [re]exposed with increased understanding during the exhibitions of Africa '95 in the United Kingdom, at a time when greater attention was being turned on events and people surrounding the death in 1977 of Bantu Steven Biko. The work reminds us that Stopforth was intimately involved in events that are now being 'replayed' and 'reprocessed' in the general psyche. After Biko's death, Stopforth worked on a series of twenty stark drawings representing the dead Biko's body. Stopforth had often met with Biko through his acquaintance with academic and activist Rick Turner and through the prototype trade union, the Benefits Society. Stopforth says,

> I was given access to the photographs taken during the autopsy on Steve's body. His poor hands and feet had been damaged by handcuffs, manacles and beatings. The terrible vulnerability and pain they embodied led me to draw them both as symbols of the war waged by the Nationalist Government against all black South Africans, and as symbols of the martyrdom suffered by many who sacrificed their lives in the struggle against apartheid (Stopforth 1995:unpublished text).

The drawings are images of terrible solitude. Details, the dry grain of the skin, the cracks in a heel, the inert fingers of a dead hand, the numbered tag on the toe showing the State's dismissal to anonymity, bring ultimate human vulnerability to the fore. Burn marks or abrasions bring evidence of the system of torture.

In the initial showing these austere works were placed opposite a large work representing violent power, in the three giant menacing faces of **The Interrogators** (1979), now identified as Biko's interrogators, a triptych of sinister forces linked by the symbolic chair. The conjunction of these works functioned as both an accusation and a reminder. Compare the faces of these three who sought amnesty for Biko's death.

The exhibition, *Africa '95* also saw a work of mine literally raised from destruction. In 1991 one of my sculptures entitled **Eugene Terre'Blanche and his Two Sidekicks**

(1989), in the collection of the South African Art Gallery, was destroyed in the gallery by six members of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, the AWB. Some protest art elicited strong, even extreme, reactions of censorship or physical destruction. Younge, Stopforth and I all suffered from repressive reaction to our work. The intervention of the AWB was real and party-politically motivated. In this way, the work, the incident and its consequences straddled both art and politics in a very concrete form.

Untitled (Remains), made in 1994, incorporates both the broken pieces rescued from the gallery after they were released as evidence by the police and the many news-clippings, editorials and cartoons that the incident generated. The swastika-like AWB insignia, left behind by the attackers, are now incorporated into the work, as is a docket card left by the police.

Another of my works has re-emerged in a recent exhibition. Made in 1993, it is a large installation representing Ferdi Barnard, the CCB hit-squad member, finally convicted last year of assassinating David Webster, a friend and co-worker of mine at both the Detainees' Parents Support Committee and another anti-apartheid organisation, the Five Freedoms Forum. When I made this sculpture, all inquests had failed to legally link him to the murder. He seemed to be always highly amused by proceedings at the inquests, exuding a confidence in the system's protection of him and his operations. But art has no need strenuously or legally to test its conclusions.

Opposite the figure of Barnard is a series of photographs of Webster's home, the assassination site, as well as a quote from Webster's research completed shortly before his murder: "Assassinations have the effect of controlling government opposition when all other methods, such as detention and intimidation have failed" (Friedman 1989:30). At the time of production, the full connotations of the work may not have been fully understood by an uninvolved or disinterested public, although the work's ongoing reception is now certainly affected by the current broad public knowledge.

We come now to the second trend. Like protest art, socio-political post-apartheid art questions actions and events of apartheid and, in some cases, uncovers abuse within that system. However, this work criticises retrospectively and introduces other kinds of complexities such as the imperatives of memory and the exploration of personal identity in relation to the past political environment. In line with the political climate, it carries

less potential of censure and requires less courage in that it does not contest an existing situation. Its themes are generally now accepted as having moral validity thus no longer holding the risk of alienation for the artist. These factors change the very notion of the 'political' in this art.

This politically-engaged post-apartheid art provides space for the expression of anger, loss and mourning as well as the exploration of guilt and remorse. In accord with the TRC and often using the abundance of now available material and evidence, this type of art exposes the wounds of apartheid as a cathartic bloodletting rather than as an act of justice.

The work of Gavin Younge bridges both past protest art and these current developments. During the apartheid years, Gavin Younge frequently focussed on the increasing militarisation of South Africa. **Botha's Baby** of 1981, a powerful statement of the opposing elements of innocence and violence, drew a strong emotional reaction when it was first shown. It was vandalised and withdrawn before the exhibition closed. Recessed in the baby-chair's tray is a revolver. The title recalls both the president, PW Botha, previously Minister of Defence and Fanie Botha, the minister who had urged all white mothers to produce a baby for their country. Younge has inverted this call to a request for an increase of human fodder for the defence of apartheid. Another work of the same time, **Riot Protected Pram** consists of a constructed metal pram, blocked and protected in the front by a steel grille and hinged doors.

Younge's **Crossing the Cunene** is a protest against the 1980/1 aggressive hot-pursuit tactics of the South African government, in this case across the Cunene River into Angola. The sculpture allows for multiple readings. The four dangling fish may be the trophies of war or game hunting but, in their smooth aerodynamic form, they also hold the menace of sophisticated weaponry. The gabled portico, which houses the fish, implies the sacred level of importance given to the defence of the South African white heritage.

Younge revisits the theme of militarisation in his recent work, calling our attention and memory to South Africa's participation in the Angolan war. Younge, Fernando Alvim from Angola and Carlos Garaicoa from Cuba are the core artists of the touring exhibition, *Memórias Íntimas Marcas*, that addresses South African and Cuban participation, specifically at the battle site of Cuito Cuanavale.

Unlike the TRC, Younge's work is not restricted to the borders of South Africa. But the stated aims of the exhibition are remarkably similar to those of the TRC, simply put, "to expose both the wounding and the healing processes" (Mayor 1998:Informational notes). The silence and repression around the 'taboo' of Angola makes the representation of intimacy and memory, of amnesia and voids of information extremely potent. However, it is not facts that are exposed. The exhibition is an exploration of painful, personal experience in the historical and national trauma that was Angola.

This work by Younge, **Forces Favourites** (1997), is laid out as a ritual circle of large clumsy bicycles, frames bound in vellum. A television monitor has been placed in the carrier at the back of each bicycle. Videos present mesmerising scenes of the repetitive activity of dung beetles, of war footage, ragged children, political speeches. In another work by Younge, **Achtung! Cabral** (1997), ten life-size quaggas modelled in vellum float above the viewer, eerily raising issues of annihilation, extinction, forgetting and embalming.

In regard to the heightened exploration of memory and personal identity, Kadar Asmal remarks that our material, personal and political identities are heavy with the detritus of the past (Asmal 1996:*passim*). And as Bunsee and Battersby note, "[E]very individual becomes a historical being" (Bunsee 1996:110) who places "himself or herself in the context of the reconciliation process that is unfolding" (Battersby 1996:11). The artist has a particular role to acknowledge the past, reveal the complexity of the future and allow a place of ritual for the individual to bridge the personal and the political. According to Sussuta Boé (1998:n.p.), the artist is thus able to open up a space to test, in a personal way beyond the confines of the official TRC, our "consciences and our complicity with recent history".

Since 1994, discourses around identity and personal and political memory, stimulated by the TRC and the newly adopted Bill of Human Rights, have been probed in a number of exhibitions, such as one at the Castle of Good Hope, entitled *Fault Lines: Inquiries into Truth and Reconciliation* (1996).

The historically loaded Castle, associated with both colonialism and the military, here became the site for the representation of a very different history. Contesting its past associations, Kevin Brand transferred onto the Castle wall, the famous 1976 image from

the Soweto riots, of Sam Nzima's photograph of Hector Peterson carried by a comrade. Similarly, in her work, Penny Siopis defied the 'honourable' masculine, military space with an installation suggesting a massacre of women and children. Mutilation was also the subject of Lien Botha's images on dirty washing strung across two rooms, the metaphor linking obviously to the TRC. Moshekwa Langa's installation made reference to the denial of land rights, the contention of which is ongoing in the years after democracy.

The artist, William Kentridge links visual art and theatre as a mechanism to [re]expose TRC issues in **Ubu and the Truth Commission**, his multi-media work using actors and puppets as well as projected, animated drawings. In fact, Kentridge draws on what Mark Gevisser (1997:4) describes as the TRC's "inherent theatricality". As Jane Taylor (quoted in Gevisser 1997:4) notes, the TRC acts as ritualistic storytelling, almost as town meetings where people turn out to hear their own histories of personal grief, loss, triumph and violation. Taylor writes that the commission, and the art that references it, have become places where individual narratives come to stand for the larger national narrative. History and autobiography merge. The autobiographical element brings what Njabulo Ndebele sees as an intimacy that has been lost in our dislocated history (1996:28-29).

Kentridge draws directly from evidence emerging in the TRC hearings, using verbatim transcripts of actual evidence. The viewer is faced with the world of hit squads, detention and dirty tricks. But as Darryl Accone (1997:14) writes, contrary to the TRC, this play condemns the murderers and expedient amnesty-seekers. It declares that evil prospers and that to forget will be an unforgivable sin of omission.

Another interesting exhibition, shown both in Johannesburg and at the castle in Cape Town in 1995, is *Setting Apart*, where the architect Hilton Judin uses archives of township planning to expose the twisted technical minds of those who designed the spatial hierarchies of apartheid. Critic Tony Morphet says the exhibition

> reads like a brain scan of South African power and madness [...] a narrow, mean, brutal, colonial place [with] detailed procedures through which black people were turned into objects of disgust and dread, and expelled [...] beyond the limits of the city (Morphet 1995:29).

Neighbourhood maps were colour-coded, using information from officials and spying citizens, to mark the race of persons who owned, inhabited or used a shop or house. This

kind of art examines and undermines the innocence of the professionals who collaborated in apartheid's repression and malevolence.

James Brown, writing in the Mail & Guardian (1998:7) about a recent exhibition by Judith Mason, decides that it takes an artist to "reveal the labyrinthine minds of officials, torturers and killers who work for political masters". In her painting, **The Woman who Kept Silent and The Man who Sang** (1998), Mason attempts to grasp and describe the courage historically shown by individuals whose stories have been told at the TRC hearings. She sees the process as one of 'logging in' to our history, a process which continues to radically alter the perception of many South Africans, including artists, of our recent past.

And if I quote Penny Siopis:

> our very sense of the present, the very idea of being a 'new South African' is predicated not only on a shared, politically-charged history, but also on the imperative to look back, unpick and unpack that history, to understand not only what happened [...] but also, most importantly, the psychic and affective dimension of that experience (Siopis 1998:2).

Our history also raises questions around the artist's responsibility within society. Lucy Lippard (1984:8) suggests that all artists, however politically naïve, are guiltier than non-artists of silence in the face of injustice, because of the communicative function of art. Protest art and later socio-political post-apartheid art can be redefined, no longer within the limits of the creation of an art-product, but as a philosophical or ethical process, linking with a wider societal programme to establish value.

The horror of apartheid has been officially laid to rest. Protest art can now be seen to have 'traced' its history and highlighted its areas of power abuse, or as Ivor Powell says, "to telling effect [reflecting] the experience of living in this country at this time" (1990:n.p.). This role was vital during the repressive years of apartheid. Now art's transformative qualities take on a different form. Apartheid is 'reworked' through the current concerns of examining our history. The socio-political, as a stamp of South African art, is no longer frowned upon, but adds acceptability to an international interest in the development of political identity in the 'new' South Africa.

Thus contemporary work remains according to Siopis (1998:2-3), "entangled in our apartheid past [and] defined by looking back" Or as Williamson (1996:13) notes: we are

held by the "recognition that the past is never over. It is real and perhaps more powerful than the present".

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