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The photographic document as subjective register in contemporary South African visual culture

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Introduction

The aim of this research report is to provide a critical framework for the reception of the photographic work submitted for this degree. My photographic work explores the potential of photographs to concretize emotion and to register the subjectivity of the photographer. The nature of photography as documentary is key to this exploration. This is because the 'truth-value' associated with photography – that a photograph is evidence of an 'event' having taken place at a particular moment in time – is as important for me for registering emotion as it is for recording empirical fact.

Photography is a scientific process that records light reflected off the subject onto film or digital format. There is a direct relationship between what is photographed, and the final image. For this reason, photographs are assumed to have some degree of truth-value. The notion of truth-value is integral to how we read and interpret photographs and is a key aspect in certain types of photography. In my research, I look at some examples from the South African socio-documentary tradition, because this tradition foregrounds factual representation. This is not to say that socio-documentary photography denies emotional impact or erodes the subjectivity of the photographer. In fact, elements of emotion and subjectivity are significant aspects in the socio-documentary tradition, but are not necessarily the most foregrounded ones.

The power of photography resides as much in iconography (subject matter) as it does with the way photographic conventions are manipulated. A significant example of the power of the subject matter is the photograph, (illus. 1) by South African photojournalist Kevin Carter. Carter's Pulitzer Prize winning image[1] was taken in 1993. The photograph depicts an emaciated child crouched on barren sand. The landscape is bare and desolate. The child seems immobilized. A vulture lurks behind the child. The photograph is black and white, sharply focused, and precise in its imagery. The figures are distinct and the figure-ground relationship is clearly defined. The photograph captures a moment in time with absolute clarity. The subject matter is crucial to the emotional impact of this image. Any image of an emaciated child is bound to evoke a certain emotive impact in the viewer. But, in Carter's photograph, the added element of the carrion-feeder lurking in the middle ground adds an extra frisson of horror.

Thus, the horror of the image is what the viewer projects as probably having happened after this moment was captured on film. That the image does not show the vulture scavenging on the child, but suggests the possibility that it might do so, is in my view, more emotively charged because it allows the viewer to imagine the scenario that follows.

The iconography works in a way to reflect a wider social concern. The child becomes symbolic of the vulnerability of all starving children; the vulture, a predatory presence. Clearly the photographer is aware of this. Photojournalist Margaret Waller, in her study-guide for photojournalism, comments:

In an interview with Charlotte Bauer in the (22-28 April 1994) …Bauer asks him [Carter] about the Sudanese child: he was already half out of his mind with the horror of 'dozens of wailing babies, alone and dying'. When the vulture suddenly landed and entered his frame, he said: 'I recognized the symbolic elements of the shot, went into professional mode and did what I had to do.'[2]

Carter's statement reveals that he had made a choice to take the photograph at the particular moment when the vulture 'entered his frame', knowing just how emotional the scene would be. This choice reveals subjective intervention. Yes, the situation did exist, but another photographer may not have made the same decision. Carter's recognition of the potential power of such an image shows that he is aware that he can make an image where the symbolic content of the work can have a powerful emotional impact. The emotional impact lies within the play between the content of the work, and the idea of photography being a reflection of the real. Knowing that the photograph depicts an actual situation forms a large part of its emotional impact.

Carter's comment on this photograph confirms that all photographs are constructed. This aspect of construction is where the photographer's subjectivity registers. The subjective element is however emphasized to a greater degree in photographic practice that foregrounds active creative intervention. The subjectivity is often regarded as more readily manifest when the photographer manipulates the conventions of the medium for a conscious emotional effect, as South African artist-photographer Jo Ractliffe does in some of her photographic work.

Ractliffe's (illus. 2a and 2b) exemplifies an instance where the subjective intervention of the photographer is foregrounded. The work is an installation of fifty photographs wedged back-to-back, in two's, between glass. The photographs are hung in a grid-like structure, in five rows. Each row is made up of five frames. The photographs are black and white, shot on 6x6 medium format and printed to 50 x 50 cm on archival fibre-based silver gelatin paper.[3] The images are in soft focus, an effect of the toy camera that Ractliffe used in shooting these photographs.

Black and white photography can be seen to refer to the history of photography and is often associated with the documentary tradition.[4] Because of the particular social context in which Ractliffe is located – that is, being South African and beginning her career during the height of 'the struggle' in the late 1980s – these images, whether intended or not, refer strongly to the South African documentary tradition of 'struggle photography'.

This fact is taken into account in commentary that artist and academic Penny Siopis has made on the work. In her essay, 'Domestic Affairs'[5] Siopis uses *reShooting Diana* to comment on shifts away from the documentary tradition of 'struggle' photography in South Africa more generally. Siopis notes the reference to the 'struggle' and acknowledges that Ractliffe addresses this tradition in a nuanced way. Siopis comments:

> … [H]ow do we deal with the imagery of our more recent history – the history of the struggle for liberation – which has been so powerfully fixed in our collective imagination through, for instance, the strong visual tradition of documentary photography. … It is difficult to see ourselves as subjects significantly different from the binary oppositions encoded in the conventions and habits of 'the struggle'. In *reShooting Diana*, Jo Ractliffe addresses this question in the subtlest and yet paradoxically, perhaps most extreme of ways. [6]

Implicit in Siopis's comment is that Ractliffe uses photographic codes and conventions relating to form and content to address the change in approach. Siopis describes the way in which Ractliffe deals with 'the fugitive', as opposed to more fixed imagery usually seen to be the norm in documentary photography.[7] This shift from the documentary tradition is evident in the content of the work. As Siopis describes:

> The imagery in each photograph is fragmentary, conveying time suspended – in respect of both 'the moment' and a larger historical narrative – and an arbitrariness in the object(s) and object-world represented.[8]

In conventional documentary photography, the idea is generally to capture specific moments, in clear and distinct ways. Ractliffe's fragmentary approach, where she crops images in seemingly arbitrary places, evokes a feeling, rather than describes a clear empirical situation. By using the medium of photography, she uses the language of what we have come to expect as empirically true, yet, Ractliffe's images seem to have a more fictive quality. As Siopis points out:

> The imagery contains traces and clues which trigger muffled associations, evoke half-memories, stimulate dispersed desire.[9]

Ractliffe's unclear imagery in the ordered installation of the photographs marks an aesthetic shift from the socio-documentary tradition. Ractliffe's iconography is diffuse, rendered in unclear focus. The unclear focus makes ones' eye move across the whole picture plane, searching for the subject. This is different to what happens in the example of Carter's image, where one looks with immediate comprehension but dawning horror at

the emaciated child, then vulture, and then barren sand.

Both Carter's and Ractliffe's works evoke emotion, but in different ways. In Ractliffe's work, the form of the work provides the possibilities for an open-ended reading of the imagery. The viewer is thus free to project meaning onto the images. The work evokes an experience of the senses. In Carter's image the emotive 'pull' is in its iconography and in the clarity of the depicted subject. Carter's subject is iconic, Ractliffe's subject is diffuse and difficult to describe in a single word. At least part of Ractliffe's subject is the *idea* of what photography is about. There is a play between the conventions of a certain kind of photography, and a shift away from those conventions. Carter's image asserts the truth-value of photography in a very direct way. Ractliffe references the truth-value implicit in photography by using the medium associated with the socio-documentary tradition of the time.[10] But, her manipulation of form does not deliver clarity or detail in the way that socio-documentary photographs normally do. The images are predicated on the truth-value of the photograph, yet they frustrate that expectation.

The shift in aesthetics (i.e. the manipulation of conventions) as is evident in Ractliffe's work, includes manifest evidence of 'the subjective'. This approach – where the subjectivity of the photographer is asserted, is aligned with my own photographic work in which the subjective register is clearly of primary concern. But, the idea of the photograph as document remains ever-present.

In chapter one, I look at the idea of 'truth-value' in photography with a view to establishing the terms of my interest in photography as subjective register. I note how the potential of the photograph to render the world with verisimilitude creates expectations in the viewer of the truth in the content of photographic images. I explore how photographs are also positioned as interpretations since all representations function that way willy-nilly. This element of interpretation is emphasized or downplayed to different degrees in different types of photography. For example, as already suggested, interpretation is downplayed in favour of the imperative of truthfulness in socio-documentary photography. I provide a brief exploration of the socio-documentary tradition, using Martha Rosler's notion of the 'liberal sensibility' to illustrate the subtle and often insidious ideological undercurrents present in some documentary photography. As I extend this discussion to look at some examples from South African resistance photography of the apartheid era, I show how the dynamics Rosler reflects on, however different the social conditions, are nevertheless significant for 'struggle photography' too.

In chapter two I examine a South African exhibition, *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art after Apartheid*. This exhibition was first shown in Umeå in Sweden in 1998, four years after the first democratic elections in South Africa. The exhibition focused on the way artists and photographers explored personal narratives in post-apartheid South African.[11] I have chosen this exhibition because of its curatorial

recognition of the subjective register in photography manifest in the works the curators selected and reflected in the personal interviews in the catalogue framing the exhibition.

Democracy's Images also included works that can be regarded as typical of socio-documentary photography in terms of formal concerns, but the content appeared more personal. The exhibition brought together the documentary tradition and so-called art photography, thus reducing the distinctions between the two categories. This convergence reflected a shift that was happening at the time from the more public use of photography (for example socio-documentary), to the engagement with personal narratives. Whilst *Democracy's Images* marked this shift, other exhibitions in South Africa such as *Photosynthesis: Contemporary South African Photography*[12] reflected similar acknowledgements of the personal.

In chapter three I develop what I mean by 'the subjective'. Here I consider the complex notion of affect as a way to explore the form and content of my own photographic work. I present an analogy with verbal language to explore how complex visual or verbal representations can trigger emotional responses in the maker and the viewer.

In chapter four, I develop my understanding of the affective origins of and the purpose underlying my photographic work. My exhibition, *River*, the practical component of this degree, is the primary focus here. The subject of my photographs for this body of work is my small child, Tomás and my process subjectively records the experience of my relationship with him. I note how the exploration of the intimacy and emotion in my relationship with my son is informed by, and connected with, my own childhood experience.

My interest in the photograph as register of subjective experience stems from my early interest in photography that seems to be connected to my perception of myself as the person in our family identified as interested in documenting family events. In this context, I was the one with the memory for detail, the person who unintentionally keeps the family records. The task of recording, for me, has been connected to processing and understanding my relationship to my family. Subsequently, I have extended this record to include my child, and in the process have realized the significance of this work as an ongoing process of self-exploration.

Photography's affective power is at least as powerful as its acknowledged and frequently foregrounded 'objective' truth- value. I use photography for its capacity as an objective trace of subjective feelings.

Endnotes

[1] Margaret Waller, *A Bigger Picture: A Manual of Photojournalism in Southern Africa*, Cape Town: Juta & Co. Ltd., 2000, pp. 260-261.
[2] Margaret Waller, *A Bigger Picture: A Manual of Photojournalism in Southern Africa*, Cape Town: Juta & Co. Ltd., 2000, pp. 260-261.
[3] Penny Siopis, 'Domestic Affairs' in *De Arte 55*, April 1997, pp. 64-66.
[4] Black and white photography also makes reference to a certain kind of formalist 'art' photography. My interest here, though, is in its association with the documentary tradition.
[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 58-69.
[6] *Ibid.*.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 65.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] In recent years, the form of socio-documentary has changed considerably because of digital processes. Whereas black and white film used to be the norm, digital colour has become the norm. The changes are particularly evident in the last five years in international documentary work. In South Africa, though, these changes seem to be more gradual, with photo-journalist institutes like the Market Theatre Photo Workshop in Johannesburg continuing to teach wet darkroom photography.
[11] The exhibition comprised of works by twelve South African artists and photographers, namely, Jodi Bieber, Jean Brundrit, Kay Hassan, Senzeni Marasela, Santu Mofokeng, Ruth Motau, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Cedric Nunn, Tracey Rose, Joachim Schönfeldt, Penny Siopis, Minnette Vári.
[12] The exhibition *Photosynthesis: Contemporary South African Photography* was held at the South African National Gallery in 1997. Academic Jane Taylor comments on the way photographic conventions are used to register the shifts towards the personal. In her catalogue essay 'Avoiding the Event', in Grundlingh, Kathy (Ed.). *Photosynthesis*. Cape Town: South African National Gallery, she states:

> The weight of the image [the documentary image] was its apparently unmediated content. This convention is undergoing significant revision. … Even where the camera has some documentary intent, there is a marked attention to aesthetics.

The shift referred to by Taylor from 'documentary intent' to 'a marked attention to aesthetics' aligns with what interests me about the exhibition *Democracy's Images*.

Chapter 1

The photograph as documentary evidence

This chapter explores the concept of the photograph as a document that embodies a certain truth-value. My exploration engages directly with critic and art-historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau's quotation from her essay *'Who is Speaking Thus?'* in her book, *Photography at the Dock*:

> What is a documentary photograph? With equal justice one might respond by saying 'just about everything', or alternatively, 'just about nothing.' In support of the former reply, one could argue that insofar as any photographic image expresses an indexical relation to whatever appeared before the lens at the moment of exposure, the image is a document of *something.* From this expansive position, no photograph is more or less documentary than any other. Conversely, one could argue that the conception of photography as a faithful and unmediated transcription of physical appearances (residual traces of the ancient faith notwithstanding) has long since been abandoned.[1]

Solomon-Godeau expresses the two extremes identified with photography in her comment. She states that 'just about everything' or 'just about nothing' by way of photographic image can be labeled documentary photography. Her rhetorical statement highlights two critical properties of photographic images. The first of these is that photographs are regarded as accurate and truthful because of their 'indexical relation to whatever appeared before the lens at the moment of exposure.' The second foregrounds the fact that in the contemporary world we have almost abandoned the idea that photographs are 'faithful and unmediated transcriptions of physical appearances' — we *know* that photographs are culturally – and individually – constructed modes of representation. In this, they consciously or less consciously carry ideological inscriptions.

1.1 'Just about everything'[2]: the camera never lies

A photograph is regarded as accurate and truthful because it is the result of a process in which light reflected off the subject is transmitted through the lens onto light-sensitive material. The reflected image exists on film in latent form until the film is chemically processed and the resultant image is printed or projected. A recognizable connection thus exists between the resultant image and the subject photographed. In this respect writer and cultural critic, Roland Barthes, observes:

> …Photography's Referent is not the same as the referent for other systems of representation. I call 'photographic referent' not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often 'chimeras.' Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*.[3]

In my understanding, Barthes' indexical sign is consistent with the semiotic work of Charles Sanders Peirce. Wells[4] explains Peirce's index as a sign that is 'based in cause and effect'[5]— a representation that exists because of the presence of something at a particular time, in a particular place: an indexical sign refers to a referent that was actually there, such as 'the footprint in wet sand [that] indicates or traces a recent presence'[6]. A photograph of a still life cannot be made without the objects being there, while a painting of a still life does not necessarily imply the literal presence of what is being represented. Even if the photograph is of a photograph of a still life, the 'original' referent can be taken for granted. Thus, photographic images that are used for montage, or photographs that are manipulated and montaged using a computer, or even digital photographs, are dependent, however distantly, on an original referent.

The photographic process produces a visual representation (generally on a miniscule scale) of what was in front of the camera at the time that the shutter was released, thus providing visual evidence of something having existed in front of the camera at a particular time and place. Because of this indexical relationship, photographs have become an accepted primary medium for recording evidence for reproduction in public documents: forensics, newspapers, identification documents, propaganda material, and personal records. The relative and increasing speed with which a camera can record a situation and in which data can be processed contributes to these uses of photography.

Photography functions as the record of a referent in a way that is more immediate than other forms of 'objective' recording. So although a fingerprint, or DNA profile for instance, are both indexical signs of a particular person, their connection to the subject is not immediately obvious in an iconic sense. In these cases, it takes time and close scrutiny to match the indexical sign with the referent. But the photograph (the iconic sign) is a copy or imitation (albeit on a different scale) of the referent that usually allows for immediate visual recognition. This correspondence between referent and reference, indexical and iconic signs, accounts for the truth-value or 'optical truth' that has come to be associated with photographic images. This mechanical, empirical, 'optical truth' or 'photographic truth' is associated with photography-as-science. In the Western world, the

idea of science as inherently objective has been the norm, and become so naturalized that the products of scientific knowledge are often taken to be – without qualification – true.

The word 'optical' in the phrase 'optical truth' alludes to the fact that the mechanisms of the camera are based on the structure and functioning of the eye – its lens, its focusing mechanisms, the 'screen' on which the image is projected. The analogous relationship between camera optics and the optics of the (human) eye has tended to foreground the mechanical processes of reproduction, rather than the perceptual ones that influence the choice of subject matter, the moment of representation, and the emotive and symbolic impact associated with the choices made by the human eye behind the lens.

Because of the supposed accuracy photography delivered in representing people and places, photographs may have been more easily perceived as less mediated than other representations of the same subjects in paintings, drawings and engravings. In photographs, the presence of the photographer as maker is more easily underplayed. By this, I mean that the mechanical process often masks the 'mark' of the maker. In this sense, it's possible to see how photographs can be treated as though they were produced with minimal human intervention. Interpretation as a feature in the production as well as the reception of the photograph has not always been acknowledged, contrary to interpretation in painting, which is seldom under dispute.

1.2 'Just about nothing'[7]: the illusion of truthfulness

Aligned with Solomon-Godeau's view on the dualism of photographic images, community media activist, Su Braden, comments that:

> Almost since the invention of photography, photographs have provided the possibility of both evidence and counterfeit. For those who felt that to produce social change they had only to present the world with the pictorial 'evidence' of squalor, poverty, ill health, war or torture, the camera became obvious means. Yet the photograph does not hold the key to 'pure' information any more than the written word or the painted picture. Photographic images can be, and are, touched up, montaged, composed, posed and superimposed.[8]

In other words, the possibility of a photograph being evidence lies in its relation to the referent, while the possibility of a photograph being counterfeit is partly due to the possibilities of altering the image itself (by touching up, montage, position, composition, etc.). A photographer also works with a variety of parameters when making images. He or she usually decides on framing (what gets included and what is excluded, as is the case of the vulture in Kevin Carter's photograph[9]); cropping (in the initial framing but

also in the re-framing that can happen in the print process), focus, format, camera angle (wide, high, low, aerial), colour, scale, grain, what to foreground, how to light (side, back, frontal), shutter speed (which affects the way movement is recorded), aperture (which affects the depth of focus in an image), and so on. These choices are seldom arbitrary, are usually subjective, and constitute the subject position of the photographer. The choices made by the photographer sets the parameters through which the photograph is apprehended in the public realm. Some of the alterations are not necessarily done by the photographer: for example, certain changes can be introduced in the printing process or in the editing and selection of images for exhibition or publication. In this sense, the photograph is often detached from the photographer, and the photographer's presence downplayed even further.

Part of what informs a photographer's choices is her/his relationship to the subject, and the reasons, whether conscious or not, for selecting the subject in the first place. Something triggers a response to a situation; the response is processed, mediated, communicated through the conventions of a visual language. Braden comments on the significance of these factors in photography today:

> As the complexity of the interrelationships between photographer, subject, photograph and audience has become more apparent, so the question of access to, and self-representation through, the photographic image has come to be seen as equally important, socially and economically, as access to the written word. A principal question has emerged – whom does the photograph represent? Do the photographer's own ideas about the subject dominate the way the picture is taken and shown and, if so, is this bias (negative, positive, class-bound, or simply personal) apparent to those who see the image? [10]

In situations in which the evidentiary value is not a key objective or concern, as in so-called 'art' or 'conceptual' photography, photographers may assert the camera more as a medium like other more obviously 'expressive' media through which interpretation is channeled. As implied above, reception is not only dependent on photographers' actions, but on social interests of the time.

1.3 Finding a middle ground

In her acclaimed book *On Photography*, contemporary critic and writer, Susan Sontag compares photography to painting to illuminate how the apparent truth-value ascribed to photography is seemingly absent in painting. In this, she defines photography through comparison with its perceived opposite, painting. Speaking of photography as an indexical sign as opposed to the iconic sign that we associate with painting (albeit that

painting is indexical in that it might register the painter's trace, and photography is iconic in its mimetic form), she notes:

> Such [photographic] images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is *not only an image* (as a painting is an image), *an interpretation* of the real; it is *also a trace*, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask. While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects) – a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be.[11] (italics added)

Sontag begins with the premise that a photograph is an interpretation, but not *only* an interpretation. It has 'usurped' reality in that it has taken reality's place, and become as real as the *something* that had to have been there in the first place. But, both Sontag and Barthes assert that photography can embody the subjective register traditionally associated with painting, even while it re-places this register within an empirical framework. Its mimetic quality makes it a particular kind of trace that we associate with 'the real'.

Solomon-Godeau's hypothesis that 'just about everything' and, equally, 'just about nothing' constitutes a documentary photograph has enabled me to articulate an understanding of photography which can hold both of these assertions simultaneously. A photographic image is both truthful and false, both a mechanical process and a human action emphasizing interpretation, however much the former – especially in the genre of socio-documentary photography – may appear to overshadow the latter. So, aligned with Barthes and Sontag's premise, my understanding of photography in relation to its truth-value lies at the intersection of Solomon-Godeau's two extremes. The discussion of documentary photography in the following section is informed by my thoughts on these arguments and positions.

1.4 'What is a documentary photograph?'[12]

The term 'documentary' was coined by British film producer, John Grierson, almost 100 years after the first photographs were made.[13] As Solomon-Godeau notes:

> The late arrival of the category of documentary into photographic parlance implies that until its formulation, photography was understood as innately and inescapably performing a documentary function. Self-consciously defined art photography aside, to nineteenth century minds the very notion of documentary

> photography would have seemed tautological.[14]

That photographs were seen as essentially documentary in the nineteenth century was commonplace and reflected in many examples. Examples are those photographers working in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as Jacob Riis, with his photographs of the Bowery in New York, (illus. 3a and 3b); Lewis Hine, with his photographs of children taken to highlight the abuses of child labour, (illus. 4a and 4b); and others, such as Edward Curtis, who traveled to 'exotic' places to photograph indigenous people. In the case of Curtis, situations were at times reconstructed for the photograph, and it was this re-construction, not the original setting, that was photographed. Yet, to an untrained eye they seemed 'authentic'. There was something in the mechanical process of photography that asserted the idea of the photograph as an authentic document. Photographs were not seen as subjective responses, but as objective recordings of reality, as truth, not a representation encompassing the subjectivity and ideology of the photographer.

Critic and photographer Martha Rosler in her text *in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)*[15] examines the aims and intentions of the early documentary genre in order to highlight the constructed and positioned nature of such photography as that produced by Riis, Hine, and others.

Rosler tracks how the term 'documentary' was first used to describe a certain type of factual record and how it has since come to be associated with press photography and with reportage. Press photography and reportage, commonly known as 'socio-documentary' or 'photo-journalism' has a history that is epitomized in the work of Riis, Hine, and later, in the work of photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, who were involved in the Farm Security Administration (FSA) project in the USA beginning in the 1930s. Because such documentary photography has come to be associated with news coverage, the subjectivity of the photographer is underplayed. However, the imperative to communicate facts through photography is not the only motivation in such photography. The stimulation of social awareness is a primary motivation. Documentary photography can function as admonition as well as evidence – a lesson, warning or 'teaching' is often communicated in the photographic image that comes with the 'factual' aspect of the image.[16] This position is problematic as Martha Rosler points out. She claims that:

> Documentary photography has come to represent the social conscience of liberal sensibility presented in visual imagery (though its roots are somewhat more diverse and include the 'artless' control motives of police record-keeping and surveillance). Photo documentary as a public genre had its moment in the ideological climate of developing state liberalism and the attendant

> reform movements of the early-twentieth-century Progressive era in the United States and withered along with the New Deal consensus some time after the Second World War.[17]

Rosler examines how power relations and ideological positions are implicit in documentary photography. Her discussion of Riis's work suggests that his type of propagandizing social work, '… (like the appeal for free and compulsory education) represented an argument within a class about the need to give a little in order to mollify the dangerous classes below, an argument embedded in a matrix of Christian ethics'.[18]

Riis's intention was social reform and '… he sought to produce evidence which would offend the consciences of eminent and wealthy New Yorkers and force reforms upon landlords.'[19] Riis's book, *How the Other Half Lives*, was a catalyst in activating the reform of the very conditions he photographed. And yet, in terms of Braden's assessment of Riis's imagery, she argues that:

> [F]or all his humanity and in spite of his success in getting a certain number of rehousing schemes established after the publication of his book, *How the Other Half Lives* (1901), Riis's attitude towards the poor was fundamentally based on pity and it appealed to the sentiment of pity in others.'[20]

Braden's comment confirms Rosler's notion of the 'liberal sensibility' associated with documentary photography. They point out that documentary photography is used by the powerful to speak about the 'powerless' and convey 'truths', about what is, in order to suggest what should be. The work is often patronizing, making superficial assumptions about 'others'. They placed the photographed subject in the position of victim, and in so doing defined themselves as opposite, as agents. This considered, Rosler writes about the position of Riis, *et al.*, that:

> In contrast to the pure sensationalism of much of the journalistic attention to working class, immigrant, and slum life, the meliorism of Riis, Lewis Hine, and others involved in social-work propagandizing argued, through the presentation of images combined with other forms of discourse, for the rectification of wrongs. It did not perceive those wrongs as fundamental to the social system that tolerated them – the assumption that they were tolerated rather than *bred* marks a basic fallacy of [this] social work. Reformers like Riis and Margaret Sanger strongly appealed to the worry that the ravages of poverty – crime, immorality, prostitution, disease, radicalism – would threaten the health and security of polite society as well as by sympathy for the poor, and

> their appeals were often meant to awaken the self-interest of the privileged.[21]

Echoing Rosler's comment about the society being in the first instance responsible for the plight of those photographed, Solomon-Godeau notes the following:

> We must ask, in other words, whether the documentary act does not involve a double act of subjugation: first, in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then re-presents.[22]

While reflecting on the conditions of those oppressed, from a liminal position: being on the border between those with hegemonic power, and those that fall victim to the hegemonic powers is itself a liberal sensibility – the point they nonetheless make is that the power of images, such as those produced by Riis *et al.*, to facilitate awareness, and possibly social change, is enabled by the so-called objectivity of photography. It could be argued that such photography for all its good intentions could reinforce control of the empowered and the disempowered, and in this, we are pressed to consider issues of photography and the rights of representation.

The foregrounding of the rights of representation has come about through the critiques from post-colonial and feminist perspectives, as well as other 'marginal' challenges to Western hegemony. These challenges exposed the interests and agendas within representation in the field of ethnographic photography and in images of women. Representation has thus become marked as political reflection, not merely as material reflection.[23] This questioning continues to unsettle and undermine the credibility of the photographic image as truthful, unmediated and transparent. As Rosler suggests:

> The credibility of the image as the explicit trace of the comprehensible in the living world has been whittled away for both 'left' and 'right' reasons. An analysis which reveals social institutions as serving one class by legitimating and enforcing its domination while hiding behind the false mantle of even-handed universality necessitates an attack on the monolithic cultural myth of objectivity (transparency, unmediatedness), which implicates not only photography but all journalistic and reportorial objectivity used by mainstream media to claim ownership of all truth.[24]

This exposure of the 'monolithic cultural myth of objectivity' has inevitably shifted the focus of attention towards the photographer and his or her individual bias.

1.5 South African socio-documentary photography

The South African socio-documentary tradition shares the properties and problems of the early documentary genre discussed above. Similar concerns to those in relation to Riis and Hine's work are evident in ethnographic photography in South Africa during the first half of the twentieth century, which also reflected the dominant ideology of the time. From around 1950, anti-apartheid photography began to emerge as a means to communicate the struggle against apartheid. The use of photography as a tool for political activism reached a peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s and became a benchmark against which much subsequent South African photography has been assessed. This was no doubt because of the impact it was perceived to have had on political change in this country. Obviously, this was not the only photography at the time and the national media published photographs daily, but tended to suppress or censor images resistant to state politics. During the period, referred to as 'the height of the struggle', the political imperative of the struggle against apartheid was emphasized, and the political ideology of the photographer was much more consciously foregrounded.

In a special edition of the anti-apartheid literary magazine *Staffrider*[25], published in 1983, entitled 'South Africa through the lens: social documentary photography', the editors state their ideological position:[26]

> 'The camera doesn't lie.' This is a myth about photography that, in South Africa in the '80s, we won't swallow without questioning. In our country the camera lies all the time – on our TV screens, in our newspapers, and on the billboards that proliferate in our townships. Photography can't be divorced from the political, social, and economic issues that surround us daily. As photographers we are inextricably caught up in those processes – we are not objective instruments but *play a part* in the way we choose to make our statements. The photographers in this collection do not look at our country through the lens of rulers. They show a South Africa in conflict, in suffering, in happiness and in resistance. They examine the present and beckon the viewer to an alternative future. …. The photographs span the universal concepts upon which the social documentary genre exists. Themes like sadness, dignity, strength, privilege and power: these prevail. But the images go beyond this. They locate these themes in a divided, struggling South Africa. These South African photographers project a vision of the realities which they confront.[27]

The editors question the truth-value of the photographic imagery presented to the public

through the government-controlled media. They suggest that such media skews the truth and they draw attention to the way that taking and presenting photographs is manipulated to suit various ends.

The particular social moment in which this edition of *Staffrider* was produced is reinforced in the mission statement at the back of the book, which asserts the potential of the camera as a weapon or tool for toppling an entrenched government and urges activism in its considered use:

> The main intention of this book has been to recognize and evaluate the responses of social documentary photographers to a changing South Africa. Change can be good or bad, negative or positive. Social documentary photography is not, in our view, neutral. In South Africa, the neutral option doesn't exist – you stand with oppressors or against them. The question we pose is how do photographers hit back with cameras? … We say: pick up your camera and go and look, record and share. The right to see knows no obstacle. We also recognize that ideals can't exist if they're not based on the practical world. That is why we say, use the system to beat the system. … Photographers deserve no special observer status. They're ordinary people who are faced with the same choices every South African is faced with – sit back and watch the bulldozer, or hit back. We say hit back with your camera![28] (illus. 5)

The kind of photography that was used in the government-controlled media was being challenged outright. The photographer was called into action, to 'play a part', just as a soldier would be called to war. So, action in this context often meant going into the field, going into the battle, not to get a good picture, but as an activist with a political cause. The ideological position of the photographer was crucial to the work done in the field. But, the images still appeal to the liberal sensibility in that they use the same themes and appeal to the same sentiments that come with the socio-documentary genre: sadness, dignity, strength, privilege and power. In spite of this, or perhaps because of this, the use of the photograph during the struggle against apartheid was nonetheless central to documenting and so exposing the crimes of apartheid, and to mobilizing the world to react. The impact of these images was intensified by the knowledge that the photographer risked censure and/or state punishment for providing a counter-hegemonic view (at least in South African terms) and the confirmation they appeared to provide[29] for viewers primarily beyond the South African borders.

This use of the photograph as documentary evidence during the struggle against apartheid is apparent in images from *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart*. The book, which forms

part of *The Second Carnegie Inquiry Into Poverty* in 1984, is regarded as a milestone in the history of documentary photography in South Africa. In the preface to the book, Omar Badsha explains that '[t]he photographic essays selected [for the] book were selected from approximately one thousand photographs submitted by twenty South African photographers …'[30] Here, the agency of the photographer as activist for the fight against apartheid, and for the ideology of that struggle, is foregrounded. The images are both subjective *and* evidentiary documents.

The photographs in the *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart* typify a powerful visual documentary tradition in South Africa: on a formal level, the images are black and white, generally in sharp focus and represent the subject in a way that suggests lack of photographic manipulation. The images are thus presented as a true reflection of a particular state of affairs. The photographs are titled or captioned, and are preceded by a written text authored by Francis Wilson, the director of the *Second Carnegie Inquiry*. The text and photographs alike function to reveal the injustice of the apartheid system and were clearly set up to do so.

The context in which each of these sets of images is presented (with their titles and accompanying texts) has a significant impact on how they are read. *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart* was specifically made as a book of photographs depicting poverty in South Africa. Presenting the photographs as a major component of the Carnegie report is testimony to the power of photographs as conveyors of truthful evidence. Indeed, the written text serves to support the visual narrative of the book. Each photographer presents a photo-essay with a particular theme or topic. David Goldblatt presented *The Night Riders of KwaNdebele;* Cedric Nunn presented a view on *Border Industries*, while Omar Badsha and Rashid Lombard photographed *The People Organize*. Joseph Alphers and Michael Davies provided comment in *Segregated Weekend*. In each case, the photographer is named at the beginning of the photo-essay, stressing the fact that the photographs are authored by individuals. One gets a sense of the photographers bearing witness to – and being affected by – what is being photographed.

The photographs are black and white; the images are aestheticized and so reflect the photographers' skills in the language of photography. The aesthetic element aids in getting the viewer to look closer. Each of the photographers have worked with his or her subject in a way that produces an image that goes beyond the mere capturing of data. The photographs have a certain self-conscious sense of a moment being captured and they show individuals integrated into their idiosyncratic spaces. People are often photographed as they go about aspects of their daily life: unfolding carpets for sale, having their hair shaved, making conversation while waiting for pension payments, waiting with children at the clinic, and so on. Images are cropped in such a way that they convey a sense of the fleeting and the momentary. Formal elements: tonal range, contrast, composition, etc. all appear to be carefully considered along with *what* is being photographed. The content of

the photographs is as important as its representation. The skill and the 'vision' of the photographer are both communicated, and with this, the individual photographer's 'mission' to convey evidence for a particular cause to the world.

David Goldblatt's photographs in *The Night Riders of KwaNdebele*, for example, are very moody in their use of light. The images, taken in the early hours of the morning (e.g. *4:am, Marabastad-Waterval Bus*, (illus.6) are lit (seemingly) only by available light – the interior lights of the bus, the headlights of an oncoming vehicle, etc. The titles of the works, their subject matter, and the way in which the subjects are depicted, all work together to evoke an emotional response in the viewer. In the context of the book, the images make a powerful political statement.

In this chapter I have engaged with Solomon-Godeau's hypotheses that 'just about everything' and equally, 'just about nothing' constitute a documentary photograph. In doing so, I looked at Barthes's notion of the photograph as indexical sign and Sontag's assertion that the photograph is an interpretation as well as a trace. Extending this discussion, I explored Rosler's assertion that documentary photography represents 'the social conscience of the liberal sensibility' and reveals the power relations inherent in the society from which it emanates. These power relations are evident even when the intentions of the photographer were not consciously directed to this end. This exploration led to a discussion of documentary photography in South Africa, focusing on the 1980s tradition of 'struggle' photography. The example of *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart* serves as a local example of the arguments outlined in the first part of this chapter regarding socio-documentary in the USA, but it also serves to frame the exhibition that I discuss in the next chapter.

Endnotes

[1] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, Minneapolis USA: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 169.
[2] *Ibid*.
[3] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. London: Vintage, 2000, p. 76.
[4] Liz Wells (ed.), *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, Second Edition, Canada, USA: Routledge, 2000, p. 350.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 350.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] Solomon-Godeau, 1991, p. 169.
[8] Su Braden, *Committing Photography*, London: Pluto Press, 1983, p. 1.
[9] See pp. 1-2 in *Introduction.*
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] Susan. Sontag, *On Photography*, London: Penguin Books, 2002 edition, p. 154.
[12] Solomon-Godeau, 1991, p. 169.
[13] Solomon-Godeau, 1991, p. 299.

[14] Solomon-Godeau, 1991, p. 170

[15] Martha Rosler, 'in, around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)', revised version, 1982, incorporating 'Notes on quotes', in, Richard Bolton, *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, 1989, Fifth printing, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996, p. 303.

[16] The shorter Oxford English dictionary defines the word 'document' as 'Document (do·ki*u*ment), *sb.* 1450. [–(O)afr. *Document* – ˆL. *document* lesson, proof, etc., in med. L., written instrument, official paper, f. *docere* teach; see – MENT.] †1. Teaching, instruction, warning – 1793. †2. A lesson; an admonition, a warning – 1800. †3. That which serves to show or prove something; evidence, proof – 1847. 4. Something written, inscribed, etc., which furnishes evidence or information upon any subject, as a manuscript, title-deed, coin, etc. 1727.' *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'document', Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1973.

[17] Rosler in Bolton, 1996, p. 303.

[18] *Ibid*., p. 304.

[19] Braden, 1983, p. 2.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Rosler in Bolton, 1996, p.304.

[22] Solomon-Godeau, 1991, p. 176.

[23] In South Africa, issues about representation and the rights of representation have been debated extensively since the early 1990s. The series of photographs of young male Northern Sotho initiates taken by photographer, Steven Hilton-Barber in 1990 sparked a debate centred on whether Hilton-Barber, as a white person, had the right to photograph this usually very private initiation ceremony. The question of representation in the instance of Hilton-Barber's photographs is examined by South African academic, Colin Richards, in his essay 'Whose Subject?' in *Random Access*, edited by Pavel Büchler and Nikos Papastergiadis, London: Rivers Osram Press, 1995, pp.151-174.
Issues of representation and ethics in South Africa are central themes in Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz (Eds.), *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art*, Johannesburg: Chalkham Hill Press, 1999.

[24] Rosler in Bolton, 1996, p. 319.

[25] Staffrider Magazine, *South Africa Through the Lens: Social Documentary Photography*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983.
According to the website, 'COSAW and independent publishing' on The writers' network, '*Staffrider* magazine was published by the independent publisher, Ravan Press, and, 'had mainly two themes: blackness and revolt against apartheid'.
The Writers' Network. Available at: *http://thewritersnetwork.org/cms/index.php?id=196* (accessed on 11/02/2005).

[26] The author of the text in this edition of *Staffrider* is unnamed. The absence of a named individual author asserts the publication as a collective initiative.

[27] *Staffrider*, 1983, p. 2.

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] One of the features of struggle photography was the un-ambiguity of the image, which was necessary to convey a direct message to a largely international audience as an appeal for support against the struggle. The images were generally iconographic and did not depict the nuances and complexities of the struggle. *Cf.* Santu Mofokeng's comment in this regard in chapter two § 2.1.

[30] Omar Badsha in Francis Wilson, *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart*. Prepared for 'The Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa'. Cape Town: The Gallery Press, South African Photographic Gallery Series 3, 1986, p. xv.

Chapter 2

*Democracy's Image*s: the exhibition

This chapter investigates an exhibition which presents contemporary South African photography in the late 1990s as a combination of documentary and personal modes of address. The South African exhibition, *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art after Apartheid*, first presented in Umeå, Sweden, in 1998 (illus. 7a, 7b and 7c), references the South African socio-documentary photography of the 1980s. The exhibition itself, the photographs selected, and the premise underlying the selection, make this exhibition a perfect prism through which to assess my own interests in the subjective and affective register of photography.

In this chapter I contextualize this exhibition: I first cover relevant aspects of socio-documentary photography – the struggle tradition – and then consider the curatorial conceptualization of the exhibition in broader terms of the photographic document. Finally I single out three artists on the exhibition, namely Santu Mofokeng, Cedric Nunn and Minnette Vári, as they seem to embody, in different ways, important aspects of my own concerns in photography. Mofokeng's work deals with the recovery of marginalized histories. It evokes loss on both a national and a personal level. Nunn's work deals with recording an intimate family history. Because of the racial mix in his lineage, his work simultaneously addresses complex national issues of history and identity. Vári inserts images of her own naked body into public imagery that has become synonymous with a South African iconography. She distorts the form of both sets of images and so marks a distortion of content.

2.1 Some aspects of the South African socio-documentary tradition

As noted in chapter one, South African documentary photography from the apartheid era was effectively socio-documentary in its form, and so aligned with the genre of photojournalism. In a post-apartheid moment, the tie to this framework remains potent. As South African photographer, Jodi Bieber, who works as a documentary photographer on assignments and whose work was included in the exhibition *Democracy's Images*, comments:

> I like a beginning, middle and end in my photographs, even when it's just one photograph. If I'm on a news assignment, I want to tell the whole story in one picture. That's why I think press photography is brilliant as a growing experience – it forces you to tell a story with just one picture. [1]

Such documentary photographs are assumed to have a high degree of verity – to be a reflection of empirical truth. Typically, in terms of their form, these types of photographs are sharply focused and include enough detail (visual information as well as captions) for their message to be communicated in the most direct way as possible. A minimum degree of mediation and ambiguity is aimed for. Both Bieber's statement and the following interview from Mofokeng reinforce this point:

> During the height of oppression, in 1985-1986, we were talking about police beating up black people; we were talking about people living in squalor. But family violence is something that was not spoken about – the breakdown of family life and structures. It wasn't talked about because if it was shown that black people fight against each other, or that some black men abuse women, people from overseas would have been confused. … If you show that reality is much more complex, people get confused and don't understand. People would like things to be easy, they don't like grey areas.[2]

Mofokeng is saying that 'struggle photography' had to be communicated without ambiguity, no matter how complex the subject depicted might actually be. He mentions 'people from overseas' and in so doing, situates the reception of South African struggle photography within a larger, global context.

The demise of apartheid and the advent of the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 meant that the political situation was no longer so intensely newsworthy for global consumption. The imperatives of documentary photography inevitably started to change. The cultural boycott had also been lifted and international doors had opened for South African photographers and artists. This new context brought fresh opportunities and challenges for photographers to produce work more reflective of the heterogeneity of the post-apartheid community. Even as these challenges present themselves, the tradition of documentary struggle photography in South Africa endures and continues to provide a benchmark against which much subsequent photography is defined. A significant amount of the work on *Democracy's Images* drew attention to this fact. The artists that I discuss have a connection to this documentary tradition, both formally and conceptually.

2.2 *Democracy's Images*: the curatorial vision

Democracy's Images was initiated by Katarina Pierre of the BildMuseet in Umeå, and co-curated with South African curator, Rory Bester. The exhibition included the work of twelve South African photographers and artists. It premiered at BildMuseet, in Umeå, Sweden, in 1998 and traveled throughout Sweden, before it was mounted at the

Johannesburg Art Gallery in South Africa in 2000. In the *Foreword* to the catalogue of the exhibition, the director of the museum, Jan-Erik Lundström, states:

> The genesis of the exhibition points back to an interest in the much recognized and celebrated documentary tradition in South Africa. During the apartheid years photography, especially documentary and journalistic photography, was a prominent discipline and a lively form of expression. It accomplished revealing descriptions and denunciations of the activities of the apartheid regime. [3]

Whilst the exhibition took the strong South African documentary tradition as a reference, the show was not intended to reproduce the dominant conventions of this tradition.[4] Rather, it provided a framework through which to record and reflect shifts in the use of photography, with a focus on the photographic document as an expression of the personal.

The aim of the exhibition was thus to promote a broader interpretation and perhaps appreciation of documentary photography as personal narrative. It also aimed to connect the domains of art and documentary photography much more consciously. The curators were motivated partly by curiosity about how the conditions for art-making had changed during the first few years of South African democracy, and partly by an interest in how the documentary tradition might have shifted under the new political dispensation. The title, *Democracy's Images*, is, according to Jan-Erik Lundström, 'a temporal marker'[5], referring to a certain time after apartheid rather than referring to work that is a literal description of a post-apartheid situation. Very importantly, the exhibition did not assume that the apartheid legacy had suddenly dissolved, or, that the situation had magically improved after apartheid's demise. It was acknowledged that, like any post-war or post-traumatic situation, the process of reconstruction and healing of the psyche, both personal and national, is something that happens over time. The exhibition was intended to mark a moment where dialogues began to shift and reformulate themselves.

The works on show address, in different ways, changing contexts and shifts in photographic, social, and cultural value. They introduce more complex, multi-layered forms and content, in a way arguably more nuanced than those typical of 'struggle' photography. These works focus on 'the personal' within the larger political context. They announce and reflect the subjectivities emerging in the new nation. As Pierre and Bester note, the exhibition works to:

> [E]xplore areas of contemporary life: personal identities, collective memory, ritualized spaces, and the lived places of everyday life. Personal identity is tied to race, culture, and sexuality… [6]

So, with this broader interpretation of 'the self' in South Africa, and with the complex ambiguities present in each of the works, the exhibition and its parts assert diversity, complexity, and heterogeneity. Indeed, the works on *Democracy's Images* reflect the multiplicity of the state of the nation at the time of their exhibition:

> The process of democratization has not only afforded artists and photographers who have for so long worked within a politics of resistance [the time] to reflect on issues of personal identity, but has also raised the notion of self-identity as crucial to a politics of national identity in South Africa.[7]

Interestingly, the curating and exhibition of *Democracy's Images* coincided with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and, like the TRC, provided a space for the creation and re-creation of personal stories. The TRC included narratives of the most insidious effects of apartheid. In the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*[8], a section describes different kinds of 'Truth'. One such description is 'Personal and narrative truth'. In this section the Commission's objective was to allow for the telling of personal stories to 'restore the human and civil dignity of victims'[9]:

> By telling their stories, both victims and perpetrators gave meaning to the multi-layered experiences of the South African story. …By providing the environment in which victims could tell their own stories in their own languages, the Commission not only helped to uncover existing facts about past abuses, but also assisted in the creation of a 'narrative truth'. In so doing, it also sought to contribute to the process of reconciliation by ensuring that the truth about the past included the validation of the individual subjective experience of people who had previously been silenced or voiceless.[10]

I suggest that the work on *Democracy's Images* also reflects this kind of truth. The work gives visual form to individual identity in relation to family history (Nunn's *Blood Relatives*), suppressed and marginalized histories (Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album*), and reflections of 'the self' as a product of past histories (Vári's *Alien)*.

2.3 Mofokeng, Nunn, and Vári

In the following discussion of three of the artists represented on this exhibition, I consider how their works establish the connection between personal identity and the larger social framework of the 'new' nation, an entity re-defined by positively acknowledging heterogeneous identity and the significance of personal narrative.

2.3.1 Santu Mofokeng

Mofokeng's slide installation *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me* comprises a series of re-photographed old family studio-portraits and text-slides (illus. 8a-8h). The original photographs would have been taken in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The families are urban, middle-class[11] black families. The sitters are well dressed and presented in formal poses, consistent with the conventions of studio-photography in Victorian and Edwardian times. Mofokeng's slide show presents a series of thirty-six images projected at a regular pace. The visual images are interspersed with forty-four captions that refer to the images. Some texts give details about the subject in terms of name and occupation, while others ask questions and offer more poetic musings by the artist:

> Are these images evidence of mental colonization or [do] they serve to challenge prevailing images of 'The African' in the Western world? [12]

With this question, Mofokeng raises the issue of the identity of black South Africans as perceived from within Western perspectives. The inclusion of the texts interspersed with the images gives voice to Mofokeng's exploration of these sitters and their socio-political context.

In order to create this work, Mofokeng retrieved these photographs from the personal collections of friends and relatives in South African townships. These friends and relatives, in turn, directed Mofokeng to other people who owned such photographs. Mofokeng followed these leads all around the country.[13] Because these family photographs were such valued possessions, Mofokeng copied them onto film. He was aware of the significance of these photographs, not just as an historical archive, but also as objects loaded with personal memory, tenuously connecting their owners to an ancestral lineage.[14]

In re-photographing the images, Mofokeng has made them uniform in scale, but, with the potential of significant enlargement or reduction. In this way, *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me* presents Mofokeng's own artistic decisions and embodies his impulse to formally (photographically) reconstruct a particular cultural identity as well. It is his choice of images and his photographing of them – now at least once removed from their source – that creates his composite work. His identification with the families makes the show more explicitly 'about' personal identity.

Mofokeng's slide show presents one seemingly prosperous family after the other, looking out at us and making us wonder: who are these people? What happened to them? And

what happened to their wealth? Who are their descendants? The images present personal narratives of individual people, unofficial stories. The installation format of display requires that the viewer spend time looking at the images.

In the description below of the image of *Mosuetsa and Maria Letsipa and their Baby, Minkie* (illus. 8c) I draw attention to the particular socio-economic status of this family and to the photographic conventions (particularly in pose) that allude to certain value-systems. So, for example, the fact that Mosuetsa Letsipa stands while Maria Letsipa sits holding the baby, points to a patriarchal system, and an assumption of a nuclear family structure.

> Mosuetsa Letsipa wears a suit with an open-neck shirt without a tie. The jacket looks well worn. It is buttoned at the waist and is slightly ill-fitting, pulling at the sides and creasing towards the single button. He wears long boots with his trousers tucked into them. His hair is combed neatly with a side parting. He stands upright, holding a wooden walking stick that rests firmly on the floor to his right. Maria Letsipa sits on a wooden chair, and part of the carved backrest and the armrest are visible to her left as she sits forward. She wears a slim-fitting, long-sleeved dress, with a high collar that encases her neck. She wears a neat hat and earrings, and dark, well-worn shoes. Her hands are hidden by the long draped dress worn by the baby on her lap. All three look directly at the camera.

Mofokeng has photographed this photograph as an object. His image includes the worn cardboard backing and its mount, which casts a shadow to the right, and thus asserts the objecthood of the original photograph.

Mofokeng's caption for the image reads 'Ouma Maria Letsipa, née van der Merwe, with her daughter, Minkie. Maria was born to a family of *'inboekselings'*, in Lindley, Free State. Albumen print. Photographer: Scholtz Studio, Lindley. Orange River Colony c. 1900s.'[15](illus. 8g) The caption comes up a few slides later, after another portrait of Maria Letsipa with her child (illus. 8e). According to Mofokeng, the term '*inboekseling'* means 'forced juvenile apprenticeship in agriculture, a euphemism for enslavement'[16] (illus. 8f). Although Maria Letsipa was born into this class, 'her family became prosperous livestock and grain farmers at the turn of the century.'[17] This photograph of Maria with her landowner-husband thus provides material evidence of a significant shift in her social status.

Clearly, this photograph is not a snapshot. It is a deliberate imaging of the family unit, taken in a studio, simultaneously special, but also highly conventional. The image serves

as a visual record of history, a sign of the need to pass on a heritage to future generations. The poignancy in this image lies in our knowledge as contemporary viewers of the social devastation that ensued.

Mofokeng's images function as a restoration of memory of this destroyed middle-class reality for Africans at that time. These images are analogous to descriptions such as those in writer Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography, *Call Me Woman*, published in 1985. Kuzwayo describes her experience of growing up in a middle-class family in the Orange Free State in the 1920s:

> It was somehow an accepted fact that every time she [Ellen Kuzwayo's grandmother] went to Thaba'Nchu, we children went along with her. We invariably traveled in the Cape carriage, drawn by four beautiful stallions. The workers in the house took pains to prepare for that trip. Among the tasks to be accomplished was the sorting out of our attire, this included bonnets called by the Afrikaans word 'kappies'. These bonnets had two or three frills, starched and ironed smooth without a single crease. Our dresses were worn without a sash or belt. They had a high yoke and a well-gathered, full, knee-length skirt. All our dresses were made from the same pattern and were made from the same quality and colour material; only the sizes were different. We were really not thrilled with either the pattern or the uniform colour when we grew older. Our coats were white, made out of long silk – like mohair. Our whole costume made us look painfully different from the neighbourhood children. According to their standards and judgment (and ours) we looked odd, and we stuck out like sore thumbs. … We wore what we were told to wear.[18]

What is so arresting about the photographs in *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me* is the strong sense of self that the subjects present, despite the effects of racial-, gendered- and class-discrimination and oppression they suffered at that time. Another extract from Kuzwayo's text confirms this self-assertive confidence in the face of such tensions:

> The climax of the journey came when we reached the town and stopped while my grandparents did some shopping. As the couple were discussing their plans, and deciding what to do, a white lady, close to grandma's age, approached the carriage and addressed herself to grandma in Afrikaans, saying something like 'Ek soek 'n meid wat in my kombuis kan werk' ['I am looking for a maid to work in my kitchen']. My grandma gave her one look and without

> a moment's hesitation, replied: 'I am also looking for that type of person – can you help?'[19]

Kuzwayo's reflections provide a kind of suggestive detail to the images, and confirm the value of Mofokeng's project. According to Mofokeng, when he began his project 'nobody understood where the people in the photographs came from'[20]:

> The 'Black Photo Album' is a story that nobody was interested in at first. In the heat of the struggle, I couldn't talk about these images. Nobody understood where the people in the photographs came from, they didn't realise that while their manner and dress were similar to colonial Europeans, they still challenged the racism of colonial policies. I want to show how their marginalization came about, how the photographs were dismissed as images and evidence of bourgeois delusionism.[21]

When Mofokeng speaks of 'nobody' he is referring to people who were involved in the struggle against apartheid at the time that he began working on *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me*. In conversation about this work, Mofokeng explains that the political ethos during the struggle against apartheid, being based in Marxist ideology, did not lend itself to an acknowledgement of the existence of and the representation of a bourgeois black middle class at the turn of the century. So, while this part of South African history had been deliberately censored by the apartheid system, it was equally not acknowledged by the anti-apartheid activists whose struggle was based on socialist ideology.[22]

Together, these images represent a collective loss, and with this loss, a devastating waste. Looking at the photographs in the *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me* series as contemporary viewers a century later, we know what was still to happen politically twenty, thirty, fifty years after these images were taken. Forced removals, dispossession, an increase in poverty, and the displacement of African communities effected the eradication of the black middle-class that is presented to us in this collection of photographs. Looking at these images from this perspective is a kind of mourning for – in Barthes's words – 'a catastrophe that has already occurred.'[23]

Mofokeng's use of the first person in the subtitle of the work *Look At Me* draws attention firstly, to the artist, his subject position as a black South African and what he is showing. But, it also draws attention to the people in each photograph: the 'me' here alerting the viewer to the individuality of each family within the body of photographs, and to the individuals in each family. This close looking at the people as individual is as important as the perception of the group as an historically concealed class. The 'me' uncompromisingly declares subjectively and demands that we take notice. The present tense of the phrase instructs that we look *now*. In this, *The Black Photo Album / Look at*

Me is as much a work of political activism as any socio-documentary / photojournalistic image from the struggle, as it is personal register.

We know a lot from the photographs, but they also remind us that we know almost nothing. The tension between the known and the unknown is what makes Mofokeng's series so powerful. In making public these images from personal archives, the work provokes questions about both personal and collective memory and loss. The attempt at recovery of this memory and its attendant loss presumes the need to re-build positive perceptions of the individual and the community.

Mofokeng's approach is reminiscent of French artist Christian Boltanski's use of personal archive in his *Archival Dead Swiss* (illus. 9) and other projects in which found photographs are used. Boltanski collects and displays these photographs in such a way that a single photograph of an individual person becomes part of a larger document. It registers, in document form, a community lost, in Boltanski's case, to the holocaust. The parallels in Boltanski and Mofokeng's works lie in the fact that they both re-present existing photographs of people whom they do not know as a way of restoring something of their own. Through making personal narratives public, Mofokeng challenges widely held misconceptions of the socio-economic status of urban black Africans in pre-apartheid times, and so recovers a history suppressed by colonial rule and oppression.

2.3.2 Cedric Nunn

I now examine two of Nunn's images from his series *Blood Relatives* that were included on *Democracy's Images*. The series is dated as 1997 in the catalogue, even though Nunn had been working on the series for some fifteen years. The first time that these works were publicly exhibited was in 1998.[24] Nunn's photographs are black and white, sharply focused, and formally balanced in tonal range. They are printed on archival paper. In this formal sense, they are visually typical of 'struggle' photography.

Nunn, like many of his contemporaries, had made his name as a photojournalist committed to fighting apartheid. Even so, Nunn, like many of these photographers, did work in a more personal vein alongside the struggle photography.[25] Why this is a little known fact, is that the political context made such personal images seem inappropriate in the face of the political commitment required.

Blood Relatives shows Nunn's immediate and extended family: a family of racially mixed descent. According to Nunn, his initial impulse towards photography was to address a coloured audience; to make images that expressed the particular struggle the coloured community had within the larger political context. Nunn's own family history and family lineage became his means of exploring this aspect of identity:

> So-called 'coloured' identity has been an issue that has interested me, in terms of my self-identity and my identity as a citizen of South Africa. … I'm a fourth generation person of mixed descent – my grandparents were the children of black and white parents – but I don't have a rooted sense of self.[26]

The feeling of not having 'a rooted sense of self' presumably prompted Nunn's exploration in *Blood Relatives*. It is as if – by mapping his lineage – he tries to find his place of belonging. Nunn's exploration has a dual function. On the one hand, the work is very personal, and very specific – the images are for, of, and about his family members and the relationships among them. On the other hand, because of his racially-mixed family background, the images also have a strong political bent: they address the larger issue of coloured identity in South Africa. The personal drive in Nunn's exploration of his family identity is informed by his activist history. In his interview in the exhibition catalogue, Nunn states '… I became an activist in the 80s and that experience still shapes me. It's not easy to turn away from that …' [27]

The photograph, *An Ailing Herbert Nunn with his Granddaughter Giovanna, Mangete*, (illus. 10b) is an intimate double portrait of Nunn's father[28] and his granddaughter. The bed, viewed from a high angle, is positioned diagonally across the picture format. The bodies are also framed diagonally framed from left bottom to top right. The angle and proximity of photographer to the subject reveals an intimate distance – Nunn must have been standing within the quiet space where the two subjects rest. The subject of the photograph is private and personal. We know from the name in title that the man is possibly Nunn's father, old and ill, in his own bed, with his baby granddaughter lying next to him. The two figures lie close together, and are obviously connected and comfortable with each other. And yet, at the same time, they occupy separate spaces, for Giovanna looks up, clutching her bottle, and he, quite uncomposed, lies with his head gently arching back on the pillow. The creases in the bedding seem to enhance the privacy of the moment. This image, softly lit, delicate, empathic, reveals the photographer's sensitivity towards a private moment. The photographer's presence is unobtrusive.

The second of Nunn's images under discussion, *Mrs. Strydom, after the Death of her Husband, Mahlatini* (illus.10a), shows an elderly woman sitting at a kitchen table, photographed from the waist-up. She holds her head with her left hand, her left elbow resting on her right hand, which rests on the table. Her eyes are downcast, revealing her eyelids rather than her eyes. Nunn's title defines the context as one of loss.

The objects in the space around Mrs. Strydom characterize a simple, sparsely furnished room. But, Mrs. Strydom, in her inward-looking pose, is the central focus of the image. Her face, sharp in focus, reveals the delicate aged skin on her right cheek and side of her

face. Soft early-morning or late afternoon light comes through a source not seen in the photograph and illuminates the table as well as the head and left arm of the subject. This diffuse light does not extend across the whole image, and leaves her dark clothing and the left corner of the photograph in shadow. The sense of weight caused by the dark corner creates a contrast and further directs the attention to Mrs. Strydom's face, and to the china bowl and the aluminium jug on the table. The slightly out-of-focus background provides just enough information to give a sense of the space. This unflinching on Mrs. Strydom creates a stillness that contributes to the poignancy of the moment. Given the title, the image reflects a solitary response to death – one recognizes the consolatory tea, the dark clothes, and the pose as associated with such traumatic moments. The title contextualizes our reading of the image as one of suffering and in this colours potential readings of the work. There is a sensitivity and subtlety in the way this image is constructed, a delicacy that contributes to a feeling of intimacy and a sharp sense of sadness. The image suggests trust between photographer and the subject.

While Nunn's work remains formally reminiscent of struggle photography: small to medium-size black and white prints, often in sharp focus, the photographs in this series image quiet times, rather than an immediately dramatic moment. For me, the details, such as the crumpled bedding, tightly framed in this image, 'stand in' for emotion. Once the works have been connected with the photographer's own identity, as they are through their titles, a whole range of affective readings become possible.

It is interesting that both Mofokeng and Nunn's personal work was kept private prior to 1994. This personal rather than overt political censorship, speaks volumes of the power of both oppression and resistance imperatives.

2.3.3 Minnette Vári

Minnette Vári's video, *Alien* (illus. 11a and 11b), featured on *Democracy's Images*, also engages with the impact of apartheid on the self but in a very different way. In *Alien*, Vári animates photographs of her own body and intersperses these with existing 'found' material from the news media, television and official information brochures. For all that her approach is both formally and conceptually very different to that of Mofokeng and Nunn, there *is* a connection. This connection comes through her establishing a relationship between the personal with a broader socio-political context. As Peter Fischer states in a recent catalogue of Vári's work:

> … Vári is guided by personal experience and deploys her own body as artistic tool. Through its use in representing subjective, individual feeling, she qualifies and corrects the worldview prescribed by the mass media.[29]

Alien comprises of a series of animated and morphed black and white images edited to make up a visual sequence. The video is one minute long but with a soundtrack overlay that is just under two minutes. The video is looped and because the soundtrack and the visuals do not correspond in length, the images and the sound never correspond at the same points.

The following description of Vári's video lists some of the images and sequences in the video. In my description I attempt to suggest the pace of the scenes and the intensity of the imagery. In the description I have focused on the visuals, although the soundtrack, a recording of Vári's heartbeat mixed with other distorted sounds,[30] is crucial to the pacing and the mood of the work. The distortion of sound and of imagery reinforce each other. About ten scenes are presented in the video with each scene 'dissolving' into the next:

> Vári's body - naked - repeated three times - small black shapes moving forward - becoming larger; three helicopters – the three figures fade out; two figures fade in simultaneously - figures waving - tourists - change to woman, lion, cub - the sound of bees buzzing - woman stroking lion's neck; woman on podium - gesticulating - speech - mouth opening wide - black hole for mouth - closing - man - black - walks past in the background; two Váris looking out - one holding camera - other looking through hand-as-viewfinder - camera moves in and out; then three Váris as delegates at table - water bottles - stationery on tables - hands and arms moving variously ; shrink to VW open 'combi' with figures in back; three dancing figures - dance sequence - figures turn around; Vári drumming with hands - wrist moving up and down; cut to close up of military helicopter flying - lion walking past; two Váris walking towards camera pushing luggage trolley; woman, crouching with stick, sangoma stick, stands up - black mask in background floats by - picture with bullet holes; then back to the beginning visuals, continue …

The images are digitally pasted onto a white background. This technique literally decontextualises the images. The figures are disfigured and deformed – stretched, pulled, warped, morphed into each other. At times, the distortion renders the human form as large human heads with protruding eyes and small bodies, reminiscent of the archetypal and caricatured imagined alien. Watching the video can feel something like walking through a hall of distorting mirrors. This, together with Vári's use of visual and aural distortion and repetition, slow motion, and rhythmical beat creates a jarring atmosphere, suggestive of fear and discomfort.

Sinister undercurrents of political power are represented in her use of the images of the Volkswagen open 'combi', the vehicle used by the Afrikaner Resistance Movement.[31] The delegates at the table evoke negotiations and deals, debates, hearings, political rallies: all features of the construction of the new South African constitution.

The hovering military helicopters suggest military presence over a situation. The image of Vári looking through the viewfinder of a camera, places her in a position of control of how things are represented, mediated and shaped, but equally could be about her own alienation if one considers that the camera operates as a barrier to fully integrated experience.

Alien has a very particular history relating to an incident in which Vári experienced a sense of alienation. In 1994, while Vári was snow-bound in a motel in Detroit, she watched CNN's[32] report of the political upheavals in South Africa, her native country. Struck by the sense of fragmentation and alienation of the reporting, she photographed the television screen with her camera. On her return to South Africa, Vári manipulated these images and combined them with other found print material about South Africa, and with images of her own body[33] to make *Alien*.

The title, *Alien,* is richly evocative: as a foreigner, Vári watches the CNN footage in a foreign country in a motel room. She witnesses footage that is deeply familiar but is struck by significant gaps in the reportage which makes the footage seem alien. *Alien* also makes reference to the problematic representation of Africa as 'alien' to so-called Western civilization. South Africa is seen as 'exotic,' an ideal tourist destination. Finally, the word *Alien* also suggests migration – South Africans leaving the country and immigrants entering the country. These ideas of alienation are manifest in the work both in terms of form and image.

Vári overlays images of her own body on the material she has referenced, positioning her body over the images of police officers, politicians, photographers. She situates her transformed body within the landscape. She disturbingly implicates herself in the unfolding scenario. These insertions and manipulations suggest a questioning of her own role in society as a white woman, 'trying out' (or trying *on*) different identities. Issues of both complicity and of non-identification are implied by her insertion of herself in these scenarios. The distortion and fragmentation of images, along with the staccato soundtrack make these insertions quite unnerving, seeming to mock the 'types' embodied in the referent.

Vári's naked body, morphed, stretched, and elastic, is simultaneously omnipotent and vulnerable in its sexuality. The sexuality of a naked female body, often vulnerable, becomes aggressive when the person whose body it is, chooses to expose it in the distorted manner in which Vári presents it. The usual vulnerability of the naked body is

precisely what makes its exposure so powerful. Vári's use of her body in this short video is reminiscent of an incident examined in the documentary video, *Uku Hamba 'Ze (To Walk Naked)* (illus.12) directed by Jacqueline Maingard, with Sheila Meintjes and Heather Thompson.[34] The footage in the video captured an incident where a group of black women spontaneously removed their clothing in a highly emotional protest against forced removals. Parts of the film are slowed down which distorts the bodies, drawing attention to their movement, making the movement almost trance-like. The viewer begins to feel mesmerized by the movement and the repeated chant of 'We want houses now.'

The power of the real-life situation in *Uku Hamba 'Ze (To Walk Naked)* is different to the constructed, pre-mediated, cut-paste-and-distort images that make up Vári's video. However, I wish to draw an analogy with it to reflect on the way that exposing what is usually private (in this case, the naked female body) in a public context, creates a profound sense of unease. In both works, the bodies are presented in altered motion – in *Uku Hamba 'Ze (To Walk Naked)* the footage of the protesting women is in slow motion, while Vári's *Alien* is animated frame by frame. Vári's manipulation creates the atmosphere of abruptness, incongruity, artificiality, and unease. Her soundtrack accentuates this, but because of its repetitive beat, the work becomes simultaneously hypnotic. There is a further connection between the works in that both videos use archival news footage. *Alien* is black and white – any colour that may have been present in the original footage has been converted to black and white. In *Uku Hamba 'Ze*, the footage of the protesting women is black and white, while the interviews with the women that are edited between this footage, are kept in full colour. Vári's montaged images, like *Uku Hamba 'Ze*, reveal an unnerving closeness between personal experience, political alienation and the intrusive and distorting power of the photographic medium.

2.4 The changing photographic context

These three artists from *Democracy's Images* all deal with the convergence of the private and the public, and, the personal within the political. Nunn's moving and emotive records of his family were made during the apartheid era and exhibited after 1994. The post-apartheid situation enabled the 'space' for making public these once-private images in the context of an art gallery. Nunn's personal narrative resonates with broader issues of identity particularly within the coloured community, issues that are being acknowledged and grappled with afresh in post-apartheid South Africa. Mofokeng's collecting, reproducing, and re-presenting of historical family portraits from personal domestic environments evokes a sense of the individual within the collective. The images are similar in style, genre and time-period. Once collected and presented together as Mofokeng has done, they are viewed as a whole that represents a specific era, group and identity now all but lost. The individuality of the each family nevertheless remains present. Vári's combination of public and private images charts a personal narrative

exploration within a socio-political domain. The title of the work – and the imagery – suggests she is expressing a sense of alienation in both social and psychological senses.

In this chapter I have discussed aspects of *Democracy's Images* to engage with the main idea that the exhibition promoted, namely that a shift in emphasis has occurred in South African photography since the demise of apartheid. This shift manifests in a more pronounced interest in the personal content than had been the case prior to the advent of democracy in South Africa.

Prior to the 1990s, photography as a medium in an art context was underdeveloped in comparison to other media, such as painting and sculpture. Up to this point, photography generally meant photojournalism and socio-documentary. In the post-apartheid situation, photography has also moved into the art gallery.

The effect of this change in context is that the photograph becomes an autonomous object. The subject position of the photographer is asserted and the subjectivity of the photographer foregrounded.

On *Democracy's Images* the context and display of the work are formal elements in themselves, but some of the works are complex in form in themselves. This complexity of form distinguishes the works from a photojournalist image in a newspaper which is intended to communicate information directly. The complexity pre-empts a viewing of a different kind. Images are not viewed for their shock value, which often, arguably, has a short-term impact. The complexity of form makes the works less explicit: emotion is evoked, rather than described. The works become meditative, and their impact arguably has a lasting resonance.

What emerged from *Democracy's Images*, and other similar exhibitions of the time, was the emphatic bringing together of the private and public. Furthermore, the exhibition made no distinction between works in the socio-documentary tradition (Nunn, Bieber, Motau), and works made by artists working with photography as a medium (Schönfeldt, Hassan, Siopis, Vári, Rose). By including different modes of photography on the same exhibition, distinctions between the various modes have been reduced.

Democracy's Images, with its genesis in struggle photography and its mission to explore and expand the understanding of struggle, gave testimony to the subtle struggles connected to the assertion and validation of the individual.

Endnotes

[1] Jodi Bieber in Jan-Erik Lundström & Katarina Pierre, *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art after Apartheid*, Sweden: Umeå University BildMuseet, 1998, p. 49.
[2] Santu Mofokeng in Thomas Boutoux (ed.), *Hans Ulrich Obrist: Interviews, Volume 1*, Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2003, pp. 623-624.
[3]Jan-Erik Lundström in Jan-Erik Lundström & Katarina Pierre, *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art after Apartheid*, Sweden: Umeå University BildMuseet, 1998, p. 7.
[4] Rory Bester, *Personal Interview*, Johannesburg, 28/01/2004.
[5] Jan-Erik Lundström in Jan-Erik Lundström & Katarina Pierre, *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art after Apartheid*, Sweden: Umeå University BildMuseet, 1998, p. 9.
[6] Rory Bester and Katarina Pierre in Jan-Erik Lundström & Katarina Pierre, *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art after Apartheid*, Sweden: Umeå University BildMuseet, 1998, p. 14.
[7] *Ibid.*,15.
[8] Susan de Villiers (ed.), 'Concepts and Principles' in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South African Report*, Volume 1 Chapter 5, Cape Town: Juta & Co., 1998, pp. 107-120.
[9] *Ibid.*, p.112.
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] One assumes the people are urban and middle class by their dress and pose.
[12] Santu Mofokeng from *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me*, 1997.
[13] Santu Mofokeng, *Personal Interview*, 12/01/2004, Johannesburg.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] Santu Mofokeng from *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me*, 1997.
[16] Santu Mofokeng from *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me*, 1997.
[17] Santu Mofokeng 'The Black Photo Album' in Revue Noire, *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*, Paris France: Revue Noire, 1998 and 1999, p. 74.
[18] Ellen Kuzwayo, *Call Me Woman*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985. p. 63.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 62.
[20] Santu Mofokeng in Jan-Erik Lundström & Katarina Pierre, *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art after Apartheid*, Sweden: Umeå University BildMuseet, 1998, p. 109.
[21] Mofokeng in Lundström, 1998, p. 109.
[22] Santu Mofokeng, *Personal Correspondence*, Johannesburg, 28/05/2005, Mofokeng writes:

> … [T]he history of the Black middle class was doubly marginalized. It is the sword of Damocles. The middle class are considered collaborators with the past apartheid system and they are at once invoked today when people are looking for leaders and icons of the past. The very class that formed the ANC (formerly African Native National Congress) was from this class, the landed gentry which had too much to lose when the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, and the Land Act of 1913 was being formulated.

[23] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. London: Vintage, 2000, p. 96.

[24] The *Democracy's Images* catalogue dates the work at 1997. However, Nunn says:

> I had shown *Blood Relatives* twice, once in Durban, at the Playhouse Theatre, along with a play 'A Coloured Place', and then at the Macufe Festival in Bloemfontein, I think in 1998. … all these showings have been truncated versions of *Blood Relatives*, the first full show will be at Constitution Hill in April [2005].

Cedric Nunn, *Personal Correspondence*, 26/02/2005, Johannesburg.

[25] Cedric Nunn, *Personal Interview*, 15/01/2004, Johannesburg.

[26] Cedric Nunn in Jan-Erik Lundström & Katarina Pierre, *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art after Apartheid*, Sweden: Umeå University BildMuseet, 1998, p. 59.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Cedric Nunn, *Personal Interview*, 15/01/2004, Johannesburg.

[29] Peter Fischer in Susanne Neubauer, (ed.). *Minnette Vári*. Lucerne: Kunstmuseum Luzern/Museum of Art Lucerne. 2004, p. 7.

[30] Susanne Neubauer, (ed.). *Minnette Vári*. Lucerne: Kunstmuseum Luzern/Museum of Art Lucerne. 2004, p.95.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Abbreviation for the American news channel, *Central News Network*.

[33] Neubauer, 2004, p.95

[34] Jaqueline Maingard with Sheila Meintjes and Heather Thompson (directors), *Uku Hamba 'Ze (To Walk Naked)*, video, Johannesburg, February 1995. The documentary video is 'based on a protest in July 1990 by a group of Soweto women who occupied land next to the black middle-class suburb of Dobsonville to draw attention to their right to shelter.' (quote taken from the title sequence of the video). Access to this work was obtained through the Wits Art Galleries, Wits University, Johannesburg.

Chapter 3

Affect and emotion

> Emotions, in my experience, aren't covered by single words. I don't believe in 'sadness,' 'joy,' or 'regret.' Maybe the best proof that language is patriarchal is that it oversimplifies feeling. I'd like to have at my disposal complicated hybrid emotions, Germanic traincar constructions like, say, 'the happiness that attends disaster.' Or: 'the disappointment of sleeping with one's fantasy.' I'd like to show how 'intimations of mortality brought on by aging family members' connects with 'the hatred of mirrors that begins in middle age.' I'd like to have a word for 'the sadness inspired by failing restaurants' as well as for 'the excitement of getting a room with a minibar.' I've never had the right words to describe my life, and now that I've entered my story, I need them more than ever. I can't just sit back and watch from a distance anymore.[1]

In the previous chapter I explored work from the exhibition *Democracy's Images* to examine the idea that there was a shift in emphasis towards the personal that had occurred in South African photography in the early 1990s. I am drawn to the idea of this shift to the personal because my own work is so heavily invested in a personal exploration.

This chapter explores the notion of *affect* for the purpose of creating a framework for the discussion of my own photographic work as the stimulation of affect is a central concern in my work. It is reflected in the subject matter of my photographs, but also through the way I manipulate photographic form. In other words, I work consciously with the conventions of photography, conventions closely tied to the assumed objectivity of the discipline, in order to register the perceived opposite of objectivity, that is, subjectivity. I still like to stress the association between these photographic conventions and the objectivity we connect to the photographic document because I want to continue to assert the truth-value that photographic documents have as a way of asserting truth to emotion. The intention of my work involves re-creating, in photographic form, intense feelings I have experienced. In publicly exhibiting this work, I bring intimacy into the public realm, and in doing this, I want to assert the validity of personal experience.

In the following section I consider two complimentary definitions of the concept *affect*, both of which are useful in dealing with my work. I then pick up on the distinction feminist philosopher Sue Campbell makes between 'the word' and 'the group of words' as vehicles for conveying emotion verbally. By way of analogy, I connect her distinction to closed and open visual forms. I then explain two different interpretations of the word

'mimesis' and relate these to my understanding of affect and how it can be represented or rendered. Finally, I relate this set of ideas to theorist Walter Benjamin's understanding that changing our visual distance and or the speed at which things are observed, provides us with completely new subjects for consideration.

3.1 'The feeling of what happens'[2] – what happens when I feel

The philosopher, Emmanuel Kant, described affect as 'the feeling of [bodily] pleasure or displeasure … that prevents the subject from being able to think.'[3] Kant's description suggests that affect is a non-verbal phenomenon in which one feels without the time or the capacity to articulate or determine what it is that one feels. Affect, in this sense, stresses the experience of an emotion, it is a felt response; it is the feeling itself before it comes into consciousness, before it is articulated into language. The feeling is pervasive, direct, unmediated, momentary. It is a visceral response, not a cerebral one. In contrast, any formulated thought about that feeling or any expression of it beyond the pure reflex (pulling away one's hand from a hot plate, gasps of shock) is always a representation of the feeling, and thus produces a mediated version of the feeling.

The Kantian notion of affect relates directly to the common passive use of the verb 'to affect': 'she was deeply affected by …'. Affect involves the senses – it is triggered by sensory experience. Seeing, hearing, smelling, or touching something may trigger an emotional charge because of an association previously linked to the experience of what one has seen, heard, smelt or touched. The association triggers a non-rational response. Kant's affect is something that happens *to* one. One does not make it happen: the person is passive in it. The person is affected *by* something that induces physiological reactions such as eyes widening, gasping, or bursting into tears.

On the other hand, according to the psychotherapist Graham Music, in psychoanalysis and academic psychology, the term 'affect', is used as a noun, to describe something related to, but distinct from, feeling. For Music, affect 'tends to have a more objective feel, of something that can be *observed* rather than *experienced'*[4]. In psychology more generally, the term 'affect' is a clinical way of talking about the externalization of and/or the representation of feeling. Where feeling 'denotes an *internal* state, someone's private experience', affect is the show of such feelings.[5]

Music's use of the term 'affect' refers to more voluntary, prompted and mediated responses. It involves a much broader range of learned responses. Here, in this second meaning of the word, responses are more or less considered, behavioural responses. These are indirect responses that are not necessarily related to the reflex responses. The response can be direct, such as 'ouch,' or it can be oblique or protective as reflected in a phrase such as 'she affected indifference.' This phrase means that she made a show of indifference, which implies that she may be far from indifferent; her indifference masks

something else. This masking can be and often is seen as a kind of artifice, itself a version of mimesis. Artifice is often considered as revealing the construction of representation, otherwise often naturalized.

For the purpose of clarity, in this section I have divided the use of 'affect' into the two understandings of the word. *Affect 1* is Kant's description of affect as involuntary, a form of bodily reflex – induced or triggered by some form of sensory experience; and *affect 2* is Music's description of affect, where the show of feelings is active – it is the representation of *affect 1*. For example, pulling one's hand away from a hot plate would be *affect 1*, and 'ow! / eina! / bloody hell!' is *affect 2*.

In my process of photographing my subject, I work with the intention of expressing an emotion (*affect 2*) that I have been affected by (*affect 1*). I attempt to create something that enables me, while making the work, and, later on, in viewing the work, to 're-live' the initial feeling. Often I am not yet conscious of what the feeling is until the work is already completed. So, my working process correlates largely with the state of *affect 1*. In other words, while I am making the work, I am following a feeling that is not processed yet. When the work is made, I recognize or I am able to apprehend elements of the initial feelings. As these feelings are complex and are not all apparent at the same time, I cannot always pinpoint all of the emotions at once. The works are thus external manifestations (*affect 2*) of an internal state (*affect 1*).

3.2 An analogy: 'the word' and 'the group of words'

> …[O]ne of the greatest pains of the aesthetic sphere is our inability to articulate our pleasures, pains, and longings. To understand affect … is centrally to understand both the activity of expression and the risks of expressive failure.[6]

The above quote is taken from Sue Campbell's book *Interpreting the Personal: Expression and the Formation of Feelings*. In this text, Campbell explores simple and complex ways of expressing emotion, drawing on a literary example. I have used these same examples to articulate my understanding of the way in which emotions can be evoked through 'closed' and 'open' forms of photographic practice.

According to Campbell, words like 'anger', 'fear', 'joy', and so on, do not have the associative complexity of the particular emotional state they are assumed to describe. As descriptions, these words have a more analytical, clinical, or removed quality. They categorize the emotion rather than being expressive of that emotion. When used to categorize an emotion, these single words stand for a complex set of feelings and physiological responses, albeit in generic terms. Campbell identifies these words as referring to 'classic emotions'.[7] Such single words give a partial idea of or refer to what

the feeling is, and provide a token. These words draw on shared understanding of the language and the feeling that the word stands for. The meaning, however, often lacks particularity and can be devoid of specific content.

The evocation of emotion, however, is arguably necessarily more nuanced. Combinations of words offer potential to convey this quality of nuance. A group of words can describe the emotion more subtly, and at the same time much more specifically, than is possible using a single descriptive word. More detail in the language makes the description more complex and more open to projection from the reader allowing more potential for association.

Campbell's example from the semi-autobiographical novel by the South African struggle writer, Miriam Tlali, is useful in illustrating this point. In Tlali's book, *Between Two Worlds,* the black protagonist, Muriel, works at a shop whose white owners exploit both their black clients, and their black staff. Campbell describes the situation where

> Muriel is 'between two fires' …, and, in the middle passages of the novel, she twice experiences a feeling that she describes as the 'white-master's-well-fed-dog' feeling.[8]

Muriel feels patronized and humiliated by the white storeowners, who don't understand why she is unhappy in her job. She explains how Mr. Bloch cannot understand why she is unhappy:

> But why, why should you want to leave? You are healthy and fat. We all treat you well. What's wrong?'
> Perhaps this was meant as a compliment, but it made me get that 'white-master's-well-fed-dog' feeling again. I corrected him. 'I am fat because I eat the wrong type of food; not because I am happy.'
> How could I tell him that I was leaving because I did not want to make tea and be sent around to the cafés to buy refreshments for the white staff? None of them could understand it.[9]

Muriel speaks about the 'white-master's-well-fed-dog' feeling to describe her feelings of lack of agency – just like the well-fed dog, dependent and reliant on its master. But the feelings evoked by the phrase 'white-master's-well-fed-dog' are much more powerful than what is evoked by a single word like 'humiliation'. Being in the master's employ is equated with being owned, fed and looked after by the master; favored (as a pet is), and so, singled out, and differentiated from other black people. Muriel is patronized by her white master; she is seen as the protector of her master's interests, and by implication, isolated from other 'dogs'. The phrase or group of words that Tlali uses conjures an image and a set of associations that evoke feelings in the reader that a single word like

'humiliation', would very likely not evoke. In some senses the single word is a cipher – 'he who or that which fills a place but is of no importance, a non-entity'[10] – and so, whilst 'humiliation' conjures up the idea of the feeling, it keeps the power of the feelings attached to the word remote and at a remove.

Thus, the use of the single word categorizes the feeling, and this effects a cerebral response, one that is removed from the feeling. With the group of words, however, the possibility of connecting with the feeling exists. The group of words evokes a visceral response, one that cannot always precisely be named or fixed, much like the experience of *affect 1*. This happens because the complexity provided by the combination of words provides structures which enable the reader to draw on his or her own rich associative network of related experiences. The group of words, which locate the emotional experience much more specifically and locally, paradoxically serve to open up possibilities of connection with the reader's own experiences. The group of words thus allows for a more nuanced personal response than that allowed by the single word, the token description.

3.3 Content and form

In this section I look at content and form as means of producing affect in photography. I do this because the content of my own work is personal, and the form I use is open. I believe that both of these elements – the personal content and the open form – contribute to the emotive quality of the work.

In *Democracy's Images*, there are examples of work that I have not singled out that present powerful cases for 'the self' in terms of their content. These works figure strongly as instances of intimacy in the public domain. So, for example, in her work *My Lovely Day*, Penny Siopis edits home-movie footage taken by her mother and combines this with subtitles of phrases she remembers her grandmother uttering and with words from postcards written to her grandmother. She lays sound over these images and includes a recording of her mother singing. While the use of old domestic home-movie footage of family asserts a personal narrative, the text and the words that Siopis uses make reference to migration: moving from one country to another in that particular era had significant political implications, connecting personal, lived experience to a broader South African history. That the work is personal opens the possibility that it will strike a chord with the personal experiences of viewers.

Artist-photographer Jean Brundrit's work operates in a similar way to Siopis's. In her series of photographs entitled *'Does your lifestyle depress your mother?'* Brundrit photographs herself and some of her lesbian friends in intimate, everyday, ordinary personal contexts. The title of the work and the nature of the images situates this very personal statement in the larger discourse on gender politics, specifically, with a lesbian

discourse. Both Siopis and Brundrit present their personal stories as documents of public concern.

The second aspect that interests me in producing affect is how formal manipulations of medium can suggest or evoke – or even provoke – emotional states. The forms that I feel best suit this purpose are either extremely visually complex, or very open. By an open form I mean an image which retains some likeness to the original referent, but which has been eroded, reduced and abstracted to some degree. This concurrent connection to and distance from the referent creates a certain indeterminacy, in which the distinctions between figure-ground relationships seem etiolated and meaning becomes precarious.

Meaning that is not clearly determined is also possible in extremely complex forms. By a complex form, I mean a form where the constitution of the iconography – and of the image – is extremely detailed. The extreme detail reduces distinctions between the elements of the image. The elements in the image are relational without hierarchical figure-ground relationships. Colour and tone are rendered in such a way that there is an equivalence throughout the image. There is thus no focal point in the image. The eye moves around the image looking for a focal point but never finding one. Instead, the whole picture plane is restlessly and repeatedly explored. This complex construction of image is over-determined. With its multiple foci, the reading, instead of being closed, becomes its opposite, and in this sense, inverts itself. In this way, instead of suggesting a singular apparent meaning, a complex of possible meanings emerges.

David Goldblatt's *Station Way, Calvinia, Northern Cape, 5 October 2003* (illus. 13) is an example of such a complex image. This image shows an extreme amount of detail: the postbox, the tree, the bird bath, the poppies, the house, the gutter, the fence, etc. are all rendered without focus on any one thing. The image has an extended depth of field with everything in the image in equally sharp focus. The colour in the image, although intense and saturated, is balanced so that no one area demands more looking than another. The result is an evenness throughout the image which confounds the establishing of a figure-ground relationship. As such, one's eye moves over the picture plane searching for codes to resolve meaning. These codes never fully deliver, and so the viewer is left to project his or her own meaning onto the work. Thus, meaning is never closed.

In relation to my own photographic work for this research, I tended to use more open forms. I see these open forms as being aligned more closely with images-in-potential. The forms are at times so open as to become almost abstract: the photographs are not clearly defined in terms of conventional figure-ground relationships, an effect that results when everything in the image is equally out of focus.

3.4 Mimesis and complex formations of the subject

> Photography has freed painting from mimesis[11] insofar as it satisfies our hunger for illusion; the photograph is essentially, that is to say, *ontologically* objective, and thus more believable than painting.[12]

This comment by film theorist Jacques Aumont compares photography with painting in relation to mimetic forms. Aumont suggests that painting has been 'freed' to extend its own terms, into the expressive, rather than the mimetic, while photography is, he argues, essentially objective, and so mimetic. The term mimesis is used extensively to describe photography's representation of the real. Mimetic form is commonly understood as being illusionistic, as representing the referent with optical verisimilitude. This understanding of mimetic form correlates well with what I see as opposite to open forms, which I now refer to as closed form. Closed form is usually overt in its hierarchical distinctions between figure-ground relationships. I see closed form as analogous to the way the single word functions – as a cipher-like description of emotion. This understanding of the word mimesis, presupposes a close visual resemblance between the image and the referent, between the copy and the original. Aumont is using the term 'mimesis' in this common understanding of the word.

The word *mimesis* has its origins in Greek philosophy. According to *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*:

> *[M]imesis* in its strictest sense means, simply, imitation. Plato uses the term derogatorily in his *Republic*, to describe the artist's 'creations.' For Plato, since all things of this world exist only transiently and are already in imitation of their Idea, to copy the things of this world is to copy copies. The problem with this practice, which is the practice of all the arts, is that these imitations, despite their increased distance from Truth or the Idea, are taken for true or give their audiences the illusion of truthful representation.[13]

Mimesis is, however, a much more complex philosophical term. Mimesis has a broader meaning which provides a more complex understanding of the relationship of the copy to the original and how this relationship between the real and the representation holds possibilities for evoking emotion.

Theorist Michael Taussig emphasizes this complexity. He views 'the mimetic faculty [as] the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference …'.[14] Taussig goes on to say that 'the wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the *character and power* of the original, to the point where the

representation may even assume that character and that power.'[15] (italics added). Thus, the form of the work does not necessarily have to visually resemble the original, but it can be a representation that *characterizes* the original. In this sense, the idea of the copy is not limited to a direct correlation between what is seen, and how it is represented.

Looking at mimesis in this broad Taussigian sense, *all* representation can be seen as mimetic. As M.H. Abrams explains:

> In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines poetry as an imitation (in Greek, *mimesis*) of human actions. By 'imitation' he means something like 'representation,' in its root sense: the poem imitates by taking some kind of human action and re-presenting it in a new 'medium,' or material – that of words.[16]

Thus, mimetic representation encompasses more than a 'mirror image' of the world. Mimetic representation can be open in form, an expression or impression of the world, and can thus, in visual representation, be seen as parallel to Campbell's example of the use of groups of words in representing complex affect.

My motivation for referring to mimesis is rooted in my interest in asserting the tie of image to its referent. This tie is what makes the image a document, however abstracted or removed the final image may appear. So, in the example of my photograph, *Bath* (illus.14), I photograph my child in such a way as to assert the independence of the image from the optical verisimilitude associated with the referent. But, I leave sufficient trace of the referent for the viewer to see or project onto the image its tie to an actual experience.

Bath is a colour photograph that I took of my child Tomás whilst he was bathing. The photograph is out of focus, but a body and head are discernable. The head is reduced to a black oval shape that dominates the top of the picture plane. Below the head, is the foreshortened body, similarly out of focus, is rendered as an amoeboid shape. The bath-water makes up the predominantly blue background. The water 'bleeds' into the amorphous body of the child, eroding clear definitions between the figure and the background.

The degree of abstraction still allows for an easy connection to the real-world referent, yet the image remains an impressionistic view of the child's body in water. The figure, amorphous, jelly-like, vulnerable, with permeable boundaries speaks of the intimate bond between my child and me. The boundaries between us are indistinct. The image represents for me, partly at least, the often-unconscious anxieties present in my separation from my child. The blurring somehow makes the distance between us seem small – my body 'bleeds' into his, his body remains porous, receptive. And so I resist emotional separation.

3.5 Unconscious optics, unconscious impulses

I want now to shift my discussion slightly to examine an idea from the writings of theorist Walter Benjamin. Writing in the early part of the twentieth century, Benjamin commented on the relationship of the copy to the original in his key text on photography entitled *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.* Benjamin, speaking specifically about photography, says:

> [W]ith the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it *reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject*. So, too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones which, far from looking like retarded rapid movements, give the effect of singularly gliding, floating, supernatural motions. Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for space consciously explored by man. … The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses…[17] (italics added)

Benjamin's essay considers how the 'age of mechanical reproduction' has extended the optical capacity of the human eye, just as, say, the internal combustion engine has greatly enhanced the speed at which humans are able to move. So, for example, the movie camera with its (then) phenomenal capacity of taking up to 24 frames per second, means that – viewed at a much slower speed – the human eye was able to see far more accurately, say, the splash 'crown' when a drop fell back into a bowl of milk. The mechanical but unconscious capacity of the technology revealed new structures in everything we see about us – this is true of the electron microscope at the one end of the visual scale and the SALT telescopes at the other. The visual reproductions retain that optical trace or tie to the original before the lens, but the optical truth of this relationship becomes less and less obvious to the human eye, whose limited visual range is the merest sliver, since it is only capable of registering wave lengths between 0.00038 and 0.00075 millimetres. As the relationship between the object photographed and the image becomes more tenuous, the greater the degree of interpretation required on the part of the viewer. As technology assists humans to perceive (more than see) an extended vibrational spectrum, it makes the in-visible visible, penetrating the 'unconscious' – what could not have been perceived before.

Benjamin's 'new structural formations of the subject' speaks to my interest in the mimetic relationship of the photograph to the real, the extent to which the form in the photograph is tied to the referent. In the example of *Bath* discussed above, the photograph is an abstraction of the real, yet there remains enough information in the abstraction to read the flat black shape as head, the pink amoebic shapes as body, the blue as bathwater.[18] But, the relationship between the copy and the original is 'stretched'. This stretching of this relationship creates the 'new structural formations', the 'unconscious optics'. These open forms, like the group of words, provides the potential for the introjection of the viewer's own related experience, a possibility which opens the work to the viewer's own private realm of affect.

In a sense, all the work that I have done since first using the pinhole camera (which I discuss in the next chapter) has been directed towards techniques that would reveal 'a different nature' to the one available 'to the *naked* eye' (italics added). This intent was driven by the fact that conventional photographs of family failed to convey a significant emotional impact for me, and this drove me to experiment with working very quickly, leaving more to chance than I previously would have. I was looking for ways to register the unconscious in a visual format that would capture the emotional truth of the moment.

Endnotes

[1] Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003, p. 217.
[2] Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness*, London: Vintage, 2000.
[3] Emmanuel Kant in Jacques Aumont, *The Imag*e, London: British Film Institute, 1997, p. 86.
[4] Graham Music, *Ideas in Psychoanalysis: Affect and Emotion*, United Kingdom: Icon, 2001, p. 4.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] Sue Campbell, *Interpreting the Personal: Expression and the Formation of Feelings*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997, p.6.
[7] *Ibid*., p. 8.
[8] *Ibid*., p. 7.
[9] *Ibid*., p. 8.
[10] *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'cipher', Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1973.
[11] Jacques Aumont, *The Imag*e, London: British Film Institute, 1997, p. 150. Aumont's use of the word 'mimesis' assumes a narrow interpretation of the word as a representation that visually resembles the world, that is, where the represented form correlates visually to the referent with verisimilitude. In this sense, mimesis refers to a mirror reflection of the world. This sense of mimesis is used extensively in relation to photography which is seen to represent the world illusionistically. Mimesis is also used in a broader philosophical sense. In this section I briefly explore an expanded interpretation of the term mimesis as representation that can encompass more abstract forms. My argument is that all creative works are mimetic as they are all representations.
[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, (eds), *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*. Columbia University Press: New York, 1995, p. 188.
[14] Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. xiii.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] Meyer Howard A., *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Fifth Edition, Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1988, p. 83.
[17]Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations.* Edited with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn. Great Britain: Fontana/Collins. 1970.
[18] The title of the work *Bath* does provide a key to reading the image.

Chapter 4

River

> That the child and its mother are exquisitely tuned to each other's affects[1] is not open to question. What is of interest to us is that the communication of affects may be the primary source of information regarding the mother's inner world as well as a primary source of information regarding the real world and its dangers.[2]

In this chapter, I discuss *River*, the body of work submitted for this degree. Nine large-scale colour photographs of my son, Tomás, and two video pieces made up the exhibition, entitled *River*. The photographs form the core of the exhibition and produce the framework for the video works. One of the videos uses a digital video process. The other video is an animation of my watercolour paintings.

As noted earlier, my subject matter is extremely personal as it explores the representation of my emotional experience. In my working process I look for a way (or ways) to use visual language to convey some sense of these emotional experiences. As has already been touched upon in chapter three, the visual forms I prefer to use are 'open' in order to allow me (as the primary viewer) to project my experience onto the work.

Feminist writer and science fiction author Ursula le Guin makes a distinction between what she calls 'father tongue' and 'mother tongue' uses of language. This distinction resonates equally when looking at the visual medium. In photography, as in writing, '[t]he essential gesture of the father tongue is not reasoning, but distancing, making a gap, a space, between the subject or self and the object or other'.[3] On the other hand, I see the use of 'open images' such as those used by Ractliffe and myself, as visual instances of what Le Guin has called the 'mother tongue'. Le Guin sees the mother tongue as 'language not as mere communication but as relation, [as in a] relationship. It connects. It goes two ways, many ways, an exchange, a network. Its power is not in dividing but in binding, not distancing, but uniting.'[4] Le Guin says 'to be subjective is to be embodied, to be a body, vulnerable, violable.'[5] I see a connection between Le Guin's 'mother tongue' and Campbell's 'group of words'. The link is highlighted for me in the introductory quote of chapter three where novelist Jeffrey Eugenides asserts that '[m]aybe the best proof that language is patriarchal is that it oversimplifies feeling.'[6]

So in this sense, I see my work as a visual manifestation of the mother tongue. My subject matter, emotion, is 'mother tongue'. The way I use 'open' photographic form to evoke emotion is 'mother tongue'. As Le Guin states, the mother tongue 'connects. It

goes two ways'[7] In my work, the distortion of photographic images in terms of their blur and their large scale, draw the viewer in – my visual language arguably encourages some sense of intimacy in that it re-creates the kind of blurring that happens when one is right against a beloved's flesh.

But, in exhibiting the work, I bring it into the public realm (the art gallery), and in writing about the work, I bring it to the 'space' of academia, and so into the space of the 'father tongue'. I use the space of the father tongue to assert the mother tongue.

4.1 Early work

In reflecting on the origins of my photographs for *River*, I consider some of the work I made before the exhibition. This early work includes informal documentation of my family, mostly snapshots of family gatherings and events. In retrospect, even these early photographs are attempts to explore the emotional and psychological register of my relationship with my family. In this way, these early works relate to *River*, which is an exploration of my emotional experience in relation to my child.

The snapshots I took of my family failed to deliver the complexity of emotion I wished to convey. My interest shifted from photographing events to trying to capture the underlying tensions present in our relationships. I wanted to evoke, and retain in an image, some of the emotional and psychological dynamics within my family. To achieve this, I felt I had to photograph my family in a more considered way. I wanted to make images that were specific as documents, but not explicit in imagery. I continued using photography for its documentary qualities, but I began to use it in a way that I hoped would evoke emotion and/or some kind of psychological tension.

And so, I started to use a pinhole camera with colour film for this new series of photographs. With pinhole photography, fixed focus is equally distributed throughout the image, which means a figure in the foreground will be equally sharp (or blurred) as the landscape in the background. A slight distortion in the image also occurs, particularly when the focal distance is short. When an ordinary 35mm camera is converted to a pinhole camera, the focal distance is short. The result is similar to the effect of a wide-angle lens, except that if the pinhole is too large in relation to the focal length, the image will be out of focus. In terms of colour rendition, the long exposures necessary when using a pinhole aperture result in extremely saturated colour. The exposures are also unpredictable, unless the pinhole is measured and calculations are made. I chose to work intuitively, rather than working mathematically with the pinhole camera.

I chose to work intuitively because I wanted to relinquish some of the elements of control in the process. I hoped that somehow, working by feel, I would be able to effect an uncertainty in the photograph. I often guessed exposure times, and hoped that these

guesstimates would bring something to the image. Indeed my decision to use pinhole had a lot to do with *not* knowing exactly what the end-result would be: the unpredictability of the image and the distortions in form and colour that would happen interested me.

Examples of these early works are *Portrait of my mother* (illus.15a), and *Self-portrait (mom's wedding dress)* (illus.15b). In these images I had hoped for a sense of dissonance, for an uncomfortable and indeterminate feeling or mood. These examples and the description of my work process in the pinhole photography reveal the beginnings of the processes that led me to the works for *River*.

4.2 The coalescence of two childhoods

I began photographing my son, Tomás within hours of his birth. I was driven by a strong desire to record his essence and appearance. By recording the details of his rapid growth, I strove to keep something of him during his metamorphosis into selfhood. Most of the photographs were taken within the first thirty-six months of his life, a period of rapid growth. I found this period hard to fathom: it often felt like our time together was insufficient. Things were happening too fast for me to really savor or even grasp. In retrospect, I realize that what I was trying to do in my photography was to hold onto each of these moments of my being with Tomás. On another level, my taking the photographs gave me a chance to make sense of the shock and ecstasy of having a child. The multiplicity and intensity of feelings that followed were overwhelming. I felt a need to give these feelings form.

My approach in the photographing is to look at my child, closely, using the camera to search for a feeling. In this process, I try to merge with him. I try to bring him so close that the boundary between us ceases to exist. I search for intimacy, which inevitably brings me closer to memories of my own childhood. Our closeness evokes memories and reminds me of my relationship with my mother. There is a generational thread that I can almost feel when looking at Tomás so closely. Partly the thread has to do with likeness – he looks like me to some degree, but likeness only plays a small part. The thread, which also has to do with the emotional ties between generations, is a sense or feeling rather than a visible element in the images. Once I sense the emotional ties, the first link is to my own mother, and then to my father, and then my siblings. As such, it feels as if my photographing of Tomás gives me a second chance to recover and explore something of my own childhood.

The photographs of Tomás that I feel most connected to are the ones that resonate with my own childhood recollections: feelings of uncertainty, melancholy, ambivalence, and pleasure tinted with discomfort. The stillness, the sadness, and the emptiness I sense when looking at these photographs, reflect my being rather than Tomás's. In this way, these images are perhaps even more about my own subjectivity than they are about

Tomás. I recognize that I am dealing with two childhoods. The relationship between parent and child – me as parent to my child and as child to my parents – is omnipresent.

4.3 A way of seeing

The images I selected for the exhibition *River* are coloured, soft and diffuse, opposite in form to the classic documentary tradition. My use of diffuse form breaks down the hierarchical figure-ground relationship that is common in classic documentary photography. My photographs are open and intangible, inviting the viewer to project a much more personal meaning onto the work. In this way they operate as a register of the psychological and the emotional.

I associate my way of working with the way *affect 1* (*cf.* pp. 47-48 in chapter three) might be made visible. In my working process itself I search for an emotion that is intangible. I attempt to manifest this transient emotion in photographic form. In this respect I am searching for Benjamin's 'unconscious optics,' a phenomenon discussed in chapter three. Although Benjamin is referring to movements that are normally too quick for the eye to see, I see a correlate here with feelings that have not been brought into consciousness yet, that is, with *affect 1*. The image I make is analogous to unconscious feeling in that it seems not yet fully formed – it is blurred and the figure-ground relationship is diffuse. So, the form suggests a potential image, an image where the subject is not yet fully formed. And the image suggests an emotion that is prior to its being formulated.

I am interested in representing Benjamin's notion of 'a different nature open[ing] itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye.'[8] Benjamin is talking about the camera capturing what is not ordinarily perceptible. In my work, the not-ordinarily-perceptible is unconscious emotion. This emotion is what I wish to record. So rather than looking for fidelity to nature, I am looking for fidelity to feeling. In this sense I like to regard myself as using photography as a painter might use pigment and canvas – as a means to express and interpret moments that affect me deeply, and simultaneously to invite viewers other than myself also to engage in the act of interpretation, in the process of affective recapitulation.

4.4 *River*: the exhibition (illus.16)

The title of the exhibition and of the video both draw deeply on the metaphorical associations connected to the word 'river'. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary describes the word 'river' as:

> … A copious stream of water flowing in a channel towards the sea,
> a lake, or another stream. …A copious flow of (something) …

> euphemistically for the boundary between life and death … one who rives, rends, or cleaves[9]

I chose *River* as the title of the exhibition to conjure feelings of flux and transience. There are other associations of water that interested me: the metaphor of river for tears, and the potential danger of water, of drowning, a fear that many mothers have. Further, the implicit notion of 'rive', which means:

> …[T]o tear apart or in pieces by pulling or tugging; to rend or lacerate with the hands … to rend (the heart, soul, etc.) with painful thoughts or feelings.[10]

This 'pulling' can be associated with my feelings of Tomás separating from me. The association of the word 'rive' to painful emotions resonates strongly with the intentions in my work.

4.4.1 The photographic work

4.4.1.1 *Doll*

The photograph, *Doll*, (illus. 17), is a close up of Tomás's face. The face is tightly cropped, filling the picture plane until it becomes a field. The face is cropped at the outer edges of his eyes, just under his swollen chin, and just above his eyebrows and includes what seems to be a part of his fringe on the left. But this shape could also be a shadow. The surface of the skin is taut, shiny and smooth. The dark brown eyes are simplified forms. The nose and upper lip are flattened out. Because of this flattening, and also because of the way the image is cropped, the figure-ground relationship is reduced. The face looks like that of a plastic doll, warm in colour and tinged with an orange glow. The lower lip is pink, rosy, full, and cherub-like. The eyes look straight ahead but there are light spots in them that indicate reflected light.

The large scale of the image unnerves. The facial features are delicate and fragile. Yet, the imposing scale of the face, a fragment of Tomás's body, suggests something potentially horrific and nightmarish: *Doll* reminds me of a dream I had as a child during an afternoon sleep, while I was alone in my bedroom. In the dream, there was an orange glow in the corner where the walls meet the ceiling. A large oval face appeared. I experienced a deep sense of loneliness as the face made visceral sounds. I awoke to an empty house.

I mention this dream because the content is appropriate to *Doll*, but also because a dream-like quality is, I feel, characteristic of all the photographs in the series, partly a result of the often-intangible open form of the works. But, the dream-like quality also alludes to

the unconscious, which harbors emotional experience. Not all emotions are brought into consciousness, and emotions frequently remain unformed in the unconscious.

Viewing this larger-than-life-size image from a distance, the face looks defined. Moving closer to the work though, the image seems to disintegrate: the blur and the grain of the photograph is revealed. The formal effects of the optical proximity and distance suggests a connection with emotional intimacy and emotional distance. The physical moving back-and-forth from the image echoes my photographic process of moving closer and farther from my subject. Along with the optical distortion, the use of colour and light, lend a painterly quality to the image. Painting is usually understood as being interpretive, and so in this photograph, the painterliness lends an emotive quality to the work.

4.4.1.2 *Linus*

The work titled *Linus* (illus.18) is a colour photograph which records a side view of Tomás, from the waist up, caught by the camera in a moment of play. His head is tilted downwards. The image seems abstract: a light, creamy-coloured field with a blue 'smudge' at the bottom centre. The blue is Tomás's shirt. Above this smudge, a dark brown 'blotch' – his head – fades out to reddish brown – his neck – at the point where it fuses with the blue.

This 'blotch' suggests a stain. But there are other, perhaps more sinister associations in its form. The blotch is also like a dark hole, penetrating the surface of the image like an enlarged bullet-hole. The black hole could also be a navel, a hole in a creamy-coloured field that represents the body. Although its dark indeterminacy suggests a deep space, it also suggests the reverse of depth within the surface. The dark, highly reflective surface of the 'blotch' operates like a mirror in which my own reflected image thwarts the establishment of a stable figure-ground relationship. I suggest that the instability of the figure-ground relationship metaphorically reflects the inter-subjectivity of the photographer and the photographed.

This photograph was taken indoors in low-lighting conditions using a slow shutter. The lens was pulled out of focus, and I released the shutter at a moment when I saw only colour and shape. The colour and shape suggest the child's body as a presence, not as a clearly defined form. The unclear form, or 'smudge' as I call it in my description, suggests the physical activity implicit in the making of the image. For me, this smudge is almost like the physical smudging or pushing around of colour, as if I were making a painting. The colour planes within the photograph appear autographic, rather than photographic. This approach goes against the idea of a closed mimesis. Rather, a different kind of mimicking happens. This 'copy' reveals the character of the referent, rather than any illusionistic likeness of him. In this interpretive painterly representation, subjectivity is fore-grounded.

Because children move quickly, there is no time to control the photographing process totally. Sometimes I release the shutter before I set the camera, so as not to miss the opportunity of capturing a fleeting moment that registers a feeling. So, there is a tension between trying to control the subject and leaving things to chance. The important thing for me is the searching through the lens for the 'feeling', and then trying to capture that feeling, what I consider the moment of pure affect. This 'feeling' happens when looking in a particular way at form, figure, ground, colour, shape, movement, and tone.

The title of the work refers to Linus, the droopy-headed character in Charles M. Schulz's cartoon, *Snoopy* (illus. 19), who drags his 'security blanket' around with him. As English psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicot, observed children between the ages of four to twelve months:

> [D]evelop an attachment to a special object, which he called the 'transitional object'. [The transitional object serves a purpose of symbolization.] … they allow the infant to separate from the mother—typically at bedtime—and stand for her (particularly her breast) in some way. … For the mother, they are distinct from the child, and for the child, they are part of himself. When Linus is separated from his blanket, he experiences the anxiety of an assault on his ego. He shakes with terror until his blanket is returned.[11]

As such, my photograph of Tomás as Linus evokes tensions inherent in Tomás's increasing separation from me into his own person. In photographing my child, the photographs that I take become my transitional object in our process of separation. The increasing separation from me is represented in my distance from him in the photograph as it depicts his body from waist-up. Furthermore, the reference to the transitional object resonates for me with my own attachment to my mother, and my family, and my difficulties in separating from them.

4.4.1.3 The significance of the titles for the works

The titles of all the photographs are intended as triggers to stimulate and extend an open-ended reading of the images. In some cases, the titles might appear too far removed from the subject matter. This is intended as a play on the idea of the photographic caption as being both evidence and fiction.

Dark and Narrow (illus. 20) refers literally to the narrow format and dark tonal register of the image. The photograph is enlarged way beyond life size. The photograph shows part of Tomás's head and one shoulder. His eyes and most of his face are in dark shadow. The shadow appears black in the tonal range of the photograph. Heavy shadows obscure facial

detail and the image is reduced to tonal shifts that are not easily read as head and shoulder. The nose and right cheek form the highlight areas of the image but register as a mid-tone rather than a bright area. His clothing appears blue.

The head looks as if it is emerging from the dark, an ominous presence in a dark room or passageway. The image hardly looks like that of an innocent infant. Photographing my child in this way, making his sweet face look dark, foreboding and exaggerated in scale, reminds me of a childhood experience. As children, my siblings and I invented an imaginary gigantic figure that inhabited the doorway of the long, red-carpeted passage of my childhood house. The figure was 'seen' only when our parents were out of the house at night and we used the idea of this huge figure to scare each other.

In *Unnamed* (illus. 21), Tomás's face is flattened out to form an off-white organic flat shape. The shape is partially encircled by a brown band that indicates hair. In the bottom centre of the image is a rosy pink 'smudge' that suggests a mouth. What would be eyes register as slight shifts in tone towards the upper section of the light area of the image. The 'nose' is completely flattened out and not formed on the face at all.

The face appears to be emerging. It has the appearance of a foetal head floating in amniotic fluid. But, the face also appears bloated, scary, unsettling and horrifying. The title of the work labels it 'unnamed'. This title for me refers to the distortion of the form that I associate with unnamed feelings and unarticulated states of being.

Still Moving (illus. 22), was made while Tomás and I were sitting in a car. The title is a play on the words 'still' and 'moving'. The title also has a literal connection to the context in which the photograph was taken. But, I use the context and title as an opportunity for a more metaphorical reading of the image. 'Still' has many associations. One such has to do with something that has yet to come. Another means 'to continue', or 'continuous', yet others suggest 'quiet', 'without sound', 'without movement', 'subdued'. 'Still' also makes reference to the process of making photographs, rather than moving images. 'Moving', refers to motion and movement. But, it also refers to emotion. We speak of 'being moved' by something.

The photograph, *Blue Eyes* (illus. 23) was taken when Tomás was only a few months old. Tomás's eyes are actually dark brown. For some reason, probably due to underexposure, slow shutter speed, or reflected light, his eyes have been recorded in the photograph as blue. The overall blue cast in this image is probably a result of incorrect exposure, rather than empirical evidence of the subject. I use this title deliberately to play with the idea of what I know as fact, with what is actually recorded, which in the case of this photograph, is not true to the reference.

Away (illus. 24) was taken when Tomás was at the stage where he was becoming aware of the camera. The title refers to him literally pushing me away, in the act of resisting being photographed. In this image he is rubbing his eyes. It is unclear whether he is crying or simply rubbing his eyes. His fingers press and push into his eyes and his malleable flesh. In this gesture he seems to me to be closing himself off, creating a barrier with his hands, hiding away from me and from the camera.

Bath (illus. 17) is one of the more literal titles. Here, I photographed Tomás from above while he was in the bath. His head, a dark shape, lacks definition internal to its form. It separates from his limbs which appear dysmorphic and disintegrate into the water in which he is sitting. The image is discussed more extensively in §3.4 of chapter three.

The photograph *Dark Outside* (illus. 25) was taken in daylight outside. The photograph was inadvertently printed darkly. My title was descriptive of the image's predominantly dark green background, and because the image was taken outside. In this photograph, Tomás's head is tilted forwards, caught in forward motion. I used the mistake in printing to play with the relationship between fact and fiction. With the title, I hope to suggest a sense of fear, apprehension, distress, and the anticipation of danger even though the image itself might seem quite gentle.

4.4.2 Video work: ***River*** (illus. 26)

Before discussing this video work, it is important to highlight some distinctions between the medium of video and that of photography as it pertains to my work. Photographs are synoptic; we view a photograph instantaneously and usually see it as a whole. When viewing a series of photographs, the viewer can select the sequence for viewing. The viewer has agency over the duration of viewing, and the order of viewing.

Video is sequential and time-based: one image follows another according to a technical function. The sequential aspect of video suggests narrative and the video-maker decides on the sequence of images, and the speed at which they are viewed. Sound is integral to the video medium and is an element that can enhance narrative and contribute to the associative qualities in the video. Where sound contains an obvious trace, like a voice that is rendered with clarity true to its original, it renders a realism that can be compared to the photographic index.

The video *River* extends my photographic record of Tomás. Again, I work with a medium that is associated with recording and documenting 'facts'.

River, is a 3.29 minute long video, on a continuous loop. I made this video work by editing some eighteen hours of video footage. The footage was taken over a period from two months before I gave birth to Tomás, to when he was about two and a half years old.

During these first years of his life – with him growing, learning to crawl, walk, run, jump, exploring the space around him – a whole lot of new fears arose in me. At the heart of these was a fear of loss, a fear of losing him. This video explores this fear.

> The video opens with a wide shot of a river and the slow, plaintive sound of piano music can be heard. Trees form a proscenium arch in front of the river. The camera moves in closer. A medium shot of the river overlays the wide view as the delicate, somewhat suspenseful piano continues. There is a fluttering sound, and then the sound of a child laughing – then an adult woman's voice laughing over the a close-up image of grass. The grass blurs, becomes abstract diagonal lines across the screen, constantly moving, blurring. Then there is a flash of grass, almost still, and sharp, in focus. The piano continues with the sound of an adult woman laughing, and the screeching sound of a child's voice. The grass, viewed from close-up, moves in a semi-circular motion, with glimpses of the grass in focus, and then a glimpse of what could be a leaf, but it also reads ambiguously as skin-tone, as a fragment of limb. But, the movement is too quick to register precisely what it is. Then there is more green, blurred grass forming stripes diagonally, vertically, diagonally in a semi-circular motion across the screen – then a flash of pink/brown – skin/body – close-up, gone in a split second, what was that? Grass, close-up is overlaid with the image of the still river, then colour changes to brown, bricks, grid-like overlay the river image. Then, zooming into the river again – child's voice still audible, with piano. Colour changes – brown, green grass again – blurred, then focused, camera moving over grass in circular motion. Then, glimpse of pale blue – clothed body of child across screen in quick circular motion – hardly time to register this. Then screeching and laughter again. Child's voice. Struggle. 'No, you can't' – screech. 'Mam-ma. Ma-mm', then another voice 'uh' – struggle. Head moves across the screen, fast, over the grass. Woman's voice – *gasp*. Grass. Piano continues. Voices suddenly absent. Only the piano. Quiet. Unsettling. River reappears. Move in closer towards the river. Sound of wheels grinding. River scene then grass. Blue, trees, grass. 'By-bye daddy' from the child. River: still, then moving towards the trees, then shrubs, grass. Grass and shrubs. Sound of wheels and piano. Melancholy. Child's head – hair only, enmeshed in the grass, viewed from above, emerges from bottom left of screen. River scene from a distance overlays interior scene – very faint – overlays close-up of river, fades into it. More frantic movement, but no

> cries. Only piano music and faint sound of wheels. Quiet, pensive. Then, the sound of the child's voice again. The river is still, except for the mist. Treetops, sky, child laughing – fading, camera moves down. River appears between blurred scenes of green, blue, brown. Child lying down, orange shirt, viewed from above, with head at bottom of frame, body rolling over, then part of an arm, the body, clothed in orange, visible. Then grass only, then clear image of body rolling over, hand limp at the side. Music fades, buzzing sound remains, black, sound disappears. Quiet.[12]

The central iconography in the video is the recurring scene of the still river, framed with trees and shrubbery. The river is static. It is more like a lake than a river. The mist that hovers close to the surface of the river moves. But, this movement is so slow that it is not always visible. In this, the river suggests an unnerving ominous presence.

Inter-cut with the stillness of the river are scenes of close ups of grass. I shot and edited the grass scenes in such a way that the *grass* moves. One is constantly reminded of the river's stillness, of its foreboding presence, as the river keeps recurring in the frame in-between the frantic movement of the grass. The frantic movement is in a partially circular motion. I constructed the visuals in such a way as to play between the stillness and the movement. An ambiguity exists in the video because of the play between the still river and the moving grass.

The audio track enhances the ambiguity. I layered the sound. I used recordings from the video camera of the sounds recorded at the same time as the visuals. In this layer of sound, a child screeches, and an adult laughs. Initially the screeches sound like excitement as they are coupled with laughter, but at one point there is a gasp from the adult voice, and one is unsure as to what is happening or about to happen.

There is a piano piece overlaying these voices. The piano track plays throughout. Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph and Dan Selsick composed the music specifically for this video. My brief to the composers was to extend the sense of indeterminacy present in the visual imagery, to convey a sense of anxiety and nervousness, while at the same time being gentle. I stressed my need to create a sense of foreboding.

The fragmentation of images and sound disrupts the narrative. My choice of title directs attention to the scene of the river. In so doing I hope to connect the melancholic piano music, the shrill cries, and the fast movement, with the associations of a river as a site of danger for a small child. At the same time, the river metaphor has associations of fluidity, movement of water, pleasure, or tears. These associations are present even though this river hardly moves.

What actually happened at the time of filming and what is suggested in the video are two different things. I took footage, both audio and video, from different times, and different places. I placed these clips in the sequence I wanted. I over-laid, cut, extended, slowed down, and intensified the scenes to construct a fictitious sequence. The video is edited in such a way that the river scene constantly recurs, as do the close ups of the grass. The scale of these, and the fast, circular motion, suggests the point of view of a child. But, what was actually happing in the bulk of the footage (and this reality is never revealed in this video, nor in the original footage) is that Tomás was chasing me for the video camera. I was laughing and running ahead of him, being chased by him. I used the footage in such a way that what is going on remains an enigma. I have constructed an artificial scenario to evoke fear, to evoke a sense of impending doom. With this play on the real, and the construction of narrative, I explore my interest in subverting the evidentiary value of photographic and videographic imagery.

4.4.3 Animation: *Ghost Flower*

Ghost Flower (illus.27), a 30 second long autographic animation, began as a series of 'automatic'[13] watercolour paintings, which I then photographed, digitized and animated. I used a quite basic technique on the computer. The effect of working in this way – painting and then cutting, photographing, scanning, composing, and re-composing / compositing the images into a sequence – gives a fragmented, partial, broken effect to the end result. This dislocation of imagery resonates for me with the kind of emotional register I seek to represent through my photographic and video work. The individual forms are open, as is the form of the whole.

The opening scene of this short sequence is of light grey 'curtains'. These 'curtains' jerkily pull aside to reveal two figures. It is as if the viewer is looking into a bedroom through the window, but the drawing of the curtains also suggests the idea of action upon a theatre stage. The next scene reveals the full bodies of the two figures. The one is a naked woman. The other is smaller in scale, a child-like figure wearing a pink dress. The smaller figure moves awkwardly across the screen from left to right, as if her legs are weighed down. On the right, the naked figure (which sometimes looks masculine) moves jerkily backwards, as if in defensive reaction to the approach of the smaller figure. In the background, pink, red and orange 'splotches' appear and move forward, expanding in scale. The small figure stops, but her head, nodding frantically up and down, continues to move. The head appears to dislocate itself from the body. The legs and arms also separate from the body, and all the constituent pieces 'fly' into a background of emerging shapes. These shapes continue to expand, until they fill the screen and the sequence begins again.

Ghost Flower and my photographic work also correspond – surprisingly – in the open form they use to evoke emotion. In a way, the diffuse imagery of the photographs

anticipates the painterly quality of the watercolours that form the basis of this animation. The visual language is in both cases expressive rather than literal.

The animation for me was a reflection of myself as an adult grappling with two aspects of my personality: my 'child-self' – playful, awkward, yet expectant; and, my 'adult-self' – a sexual body, vulnerable, fearful, reticent. While *Ghost Flower* reflected my adult experience, the photographs for *River* highlighted for me my childhood experience, and yet *River*, is also the work that speaks most directly about Tomás. But, even so, in retrospect, I see that this video was more about my fear of losing him, my vulnerability as a mother, my not knowing what impact my actions will have on his life. In short, the works for *River* more strongly reflect my internal world than they do any external reality.

Endnotes

[1]'Affect' in this quotation seems to refer to *affect 1*, Kant's unmediated emotion, while the phrase 'the communication of affect' is closer in intent to Music's understanding of the word.
[2] Modell, Arnold H. 1988. *Psychoanalysis in a New Context: Object Love and Reality*. Madison and Connecticut: International Universities Press. Inc. pp. 23 -24).
[3] Ursula K. Le Guin. *Dancing at the Edge of the World*. Hammersmith. London: Paladin. 1989. pp. 147-148.
[4] Ibid., p. 149.
[5] Ibid., p. 151.
[6] Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003, p. 217.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations,* Great Britain: Fontana/Collins. 1970. pp. 238-239
[9] *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'river', Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1973.
[10] *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'rive', Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1973.
[11] Laurie Schneider-Adams, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction*, Colorado USA: Westview Press, 1996, pp. 200-201.
[12] My description is written in a way that I hope to evoke the pace and mood of the video work, as I have done in my description of Vári's work in chapter two.
[13] I use the term 'automatic' from the idea of automatism in the surrealist sense of the word, which refers to a way of drawing that was done without conscious control, with involuntary movement. This type of drawing was considered by the surrealists as reflecting the sub-conscious.

Concluding note

This research has enriched my intellectual and creative practice in a variety of ways. It has directed me to new ways of thinking about my photographic work and has literally provoked my embarking on a new series of photographs which, though quite different from those I produced for this degree, clearly build on this earlier work.

In concluding this research I feel it is necessary to review certain aspects covered in my report. In chapter one I explored the notion of truth-value in photography to understand the assumptions that are often made regarding the relationship of photographs to the real. This exploration helped me gain insight into my own practice in relation to how I assert formal aspects of my photographs to work with, or against, assumptions of truth-value. In chapter one I referred to examples from the South African socio-documentary tradition – or 'struggle' photography – as it is often called, to situate my discussion. The reference had a dual purpose. The images discussed enabled me to explore notions of truth-value in relation to photographs expressly intended to convey facts. 'Struggle' photography was also a convenient example for me to use because it set up the background for the exhibition *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art after Apartheid* which I discussed in chapter two. *Democracy's Images* registered a shift in thinking regarding photography in South Africa – a shift from the very public socio-documentary orientation just mentioned to more personal motivations for making photographs. Thus, discussion of *Democracy's Images* also enabled me to locate my own photographic practice within the broader South African contemporary art and photography context.

My interest in affect, as discussed in chapter three, came through my process of using photography as a personal document in photographing my child. In this process which involved seeing the photographs in relation to one another, I realized that my work was strongly also about my own childhood experience. I recall looking at my child when photographing him and also at the still photographs of him and feeling uncomfortable about the way I was representing him. At a point, I recognized that part of this discomfort was that I was looking at *myself* in these photographs. This is not only because we share a strong physical likeness, but because the moods of the pictures were identifiable as my own. When I finally exhibited the work for *River* I realized that the exhibition was a critical part of my own emotional, intellectual and artistic development.

In my photographs I recognize the complex blurring of subjectivities between my sense of self and the sense I have of my child, a blurring that has to do with a feeling of the elision of boundaries between us which resists our inevitable separation process. In the first years of Tomás's life I felt that his body was still strongly part of my body; as if the boundaries were 'rubbing against each other.' The form of my photographs with their blurred imagery I see as strongly recreating this experience for me. In processing our

relationship and trying to work out where he begins and where I end, I looked at the images I was making and – to my surprise – felt my own connections with my mother, both past and present. I felt a similar 'rubbing together' of emotional experience between my mother and I. I recognized my own childhood anxiety about being physically separated from my mother and I was able to see how my relationship with her informs my way of being in the world.

In trying to concretize emotion, it is difficult to articulate the emotional experience. The only way that I found suitable is to 'meddle' with the form, so that the form somehow echoes the feeling. In the process of 'meddling', forms suggest consciousness. But because of the nature of emotion, the feelings can never be mimetic. Any attempt to replicate the emotion is frustrated to some point. The un-attainability of accurate representation is reflected somewhat in the form of the work, hence the abstraction, the open-endedness, the non-delivery of precision.

Photography seems to provide a 'structure' for my emotion. Looking at my unframed large-scale photographs, the edges of the images seem very clear-cut and precise in relation to the open porous form of the imagery. Somehow, the photographic medium, because of its mechanical processes, seems to 'contain' emotion for me. The work process itself is a matter of trying to contain, yet remaining open, trying to articulate, but never pinning down.

In my still photographs and video that constitute my exhibition *River*, I use photography in a painterly way. But, what I do is different but no less rich in expressive possibilities than painting for all that photography is regarded as a more mediated, less subjective medium. In fact I am drawn to using a medium that is usually perceived as being objective to grapple with the subjective. In this I feel my photographs assert the truth-value associated with social documentary, but my photographs document emotion.

Writing about the work to create a theoretical framework within which to understand my process has enabled me to reflect more deeply about my motivation for taking photographs and how I have been taking them. In the research and writing process, I have realized that what drives me to make work is the desire to evoke emotion, to make a 'picture' of my emotion. I want the work to *look* like how I feel. How I feel is the referent – the real-world reference is my unconscious.

By way of concluding I would like to briefly mention my current work as a way of specifying my comments about how my research for this degree has opened up new possibilities for my photographic practice. I am now working with space and photographs of space. The emotional impact of these images is often dependent on and or associated with memory. I now focus on the spaces in which I grew up, and the spaces in which I am currently living. Concurrently, I have photographed my father's home in another country,

which I ‘packed up’ before his death and after my grandmother’s death. I have photographed their clothing and paraphernalia, and the space they lived in together. My concerns are in dealing with the past and the present, simultaneously – in dealing with similarities, difference, and the charge of emotion that photographs allow, or, do not deliver. The images are colour, and in sharp focus. Relevant to me now is the way in which I put images together as a series, and how images read in relation to each other in terms of scale, content and subject. I hope for the resulting associations to create similar sensations or feelings – which I see as fragments of emotion – to those that I was working with in my photographs of Tomás.

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