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# From state of emergency to the dawn of democracy: revisiting exhibitions of South African art held in South Africa (1984-1997)

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**2016-07-29**
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/20772

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## ABSTRACT

This research project explores the role of art exhibitions in bringing the work of African artists, in this case 'rural' South Africa artists, to the attention of the contemporary world. Broadly it seeks to explore questions that arise from the construction of the category of 'African art', its canonisation, representation and precarious transition from ethnology to art. By examining the conditions under which the work of black 'rural' artists in South Africa was included in major national art exhibitions of South African art during the 1980s, an inquiry is made as to why some or most of these artists have since disappeared and slipped away from the mainstream. There appears to have been very little written about these artists, with the exception of a handful, in the context of these exhibitions. As a result this study proposes a review of the content and contexts of these exhibitions so as to determine their role in generating written commentary and critiques that established the differentials that I will argue were at play in the ways in which 'rural' black artists were included, received and have ultimately disappeared from view in the high art arena.