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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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# FROM STATE OF EMERGENCY TO THE DAWN OF DEMOCRACY: REVISITING EXHIBITIONS OF SOUTH AFRICAN ART HELD IN SOUTH AFRICA (1984–1997)




A thesis submitted in fulfilment of requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
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by
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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.

## DECLARATION

I declare that this research is my own, unaided work. It has been submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.

Declared at the University of Witwatersrand on the 25th July 2015

……..

Signature

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this degree to my loving parents Kehla Elijah and Boile Phongo Mdluli and all the artists whose work has taught me invaluable lessons about who I am, where I come from and where I am going.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| FUBA | Federated Union of Black Artists |
| JAG | Johannesburg Art Gallery |
| SANG | South African National Gallery |
| UNISA | University of South Africa |
| VDC | Venda Development Corporation |
| MOMA | Museum of Modern Art |
| WAM | Wits Art Museum |

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Historical background

The period between the mid-1980s and the dawn of democracy in 1994 was in many ways a critical turning point in South Africa's socio-political landscape, with the apartheid government declaring a countrywide[1] state of emergency in 1986. In the cultural sector this was not only a challenging time for both black activists and white liberals in the arts, but was also a time when cultural resistance took a radical turn in solidarity with sanctions imposed by the international community, through promoting the cultural boycott. It marked a mobilisation by members of the arts community whose contribution to the liberation movement is often overlooked because, as Nomazengele Mangaliso has argued, in South Africa 'culture is often an abstraction of various elements that range from the aesthetics of the nation to philosophical ideas' (Mangaliso 1999: 232). This is furthermore complicated by the idea, as noted by David Koloane, that 'there is no common denominator as to what really constitutes an "authentic" African expression' (Koloane 1993: 99). In addition to this clear political statement, and more importantly, Koloane attributes the problem of black art identity to two critical events in history: colonialism and industrialisation. These, he says, 'introduced the commodification of artefacts and creativity in general in African communities' (Koloane 1993: 99).

As a result of these two conditions, the writing of South African art[2] history has for the most part remained fragmented and displaced from its social and artistic narrative, which has not provided a linear account of the history of Black art. Thembinkosi Goniwe has therefore claimed that 'the story of South African art is yet to be written' (Goniwe 2009: 25). Citing art critic and academic Colin Richards, Goniwe not only summarised what he perceived as the state of art history writing in South Africa but also highlighted the role of art historians and art institutions in South Africa in accounting for this history. The account of the socio-political context of South Africa at this time is thus brief but intended to illustrate that the oppressive

[1] The first state of emergency was initially declared in 1985 however it was covering the Eastern Cape, Pretoria (now Tshwane) – Witwatersrand (also know as the Greater Johannesburg) – Vaal (PWV) areas and later extended to the Western Cape. (SAHA n.d. )

[2] See glossary in page 189

laws of apartheid not only permeated through every aspect of life, but, in the cultural sector, had consequences for how the political shift in the country became synonymous with transformation within major arts centres, cultural institutions, and the context of art production. This shift in turn shaped ideas around exhibitions and how they function within these spaces in particular ways, especially for the cultural lives of the majority of black people living in the country.

Sabine Marschall notes that one of the legacies of apartheid, set along its principles of separatism, was 'to reinforce and encourage each racial and ethnic group to develop its own set of traditions' (Marschall 2001: 51). This historical legacy, she notes, has not only tended 'to differentiate the works of many self-taught black artists from academically trained internationally connected whites' (2001: 51), but also in so doing has formulated rigid perspectives on art criticism and scholarship fixed upon what she points out are 'hierarchical division between various categories' (2001: 51). These issues have been discussed on various platforms, including conference, museum and gallery talks; however, in this study I wish to focus on the implications of this historical legacy for the conceptualisation and writing of art history.

In the first chapter I examine the notion of the exhibition particularly those that start to complicate the relationship between the exhibition and the curatorial. While the thesis does not go into detail on how the two are intertwined, as this is not the primary focus, this chapter aims to orientate the reader to the historical significance of exhibitions and the kinds of impressions, curatorial dynamics and narratives that make them contentious spaces. As noted by Reese Greenberg *et al*. "art exhibitions and anthologies are primary vehicles for the production and dissemination of knowledge". (Greenberg *et al*. 1996: 1) The period covered in this study thus does not only explore the re-emergence of large-scale exhibitions but also points to their significance as "epitomes of intellectual and cultural manifestations". (Greenberg *et al*. 1996: 1) In this case the larger question is the writing of expanded art histories, where exhibitions become part of a more complex matrix of exhibition agendas and curatorial motives that have shaped certain artistic forms in particular ways. While there is much to be accounted for in the form of the exhibition as an entity, the correlation between the *Magiciens de la Terre* and *Tributaries* serves to illustrate how exhibitions are significant components in the politics of history and the visual. This chapter is therefore an important moment to present the methodology of how the three

case studies will be approached and engaged in relation to the selected group of artists woven into the narrative of the overall study.

The issues invoked by the first chapter are introduced by an examination of the first exhibition, *Tributaries: A view of contemporary South African art (1985)*. Held in South Africa in 1985, *Tributaries* was a large-scale exhibition that introduced a new crop of artists and a variety of visual artistic expressions to the attention of art audiences. Although unintentional, the exhibition also generated categories that would later influence the reception and promotion of certain artists. The chapter deliberates this by first probing the domain of the category of African[3] art and how this is not necessarily linked to the geography of the continent but rather its historical appropriation into the western art paradigm. The politics of these links are analogous to those outlined by James Clifford's writings detailing the impasse of a classificatory system imposed by the nature of collecting, museum spaces and an understanding of these institutional structures in relation to this type of art. For this reason in the theoretical formulation of questions the thesis seeks to address, there are moments where postcolonial theory is invoked, which tends to suggest a probe into identity politics. While this may be the case in this chapter and the subsequent chapter - given the inference to the politics of race and representation integrated in the overall discussion – it must be noted that identity politics are not central to this discussion.

The third chapter looks at the exhibition *The Neglected Tradition: towards a new history of South African art (1930 – 1988),* which followed *Tributaries* five years later. Although the exhibition was held two months after the *3rd Cape Town Triennial* it is placed before the triennial because of the groundwork that preceded its launch. *The Neglected Tradition* differed slightly from the other two exhibitions discussed in this study in that it was more overtly political in its intentions sited as an attempt to re-write the South African art historical narrative. In this instance it is suggested that the exhibition had particular ideas about what constitutes "black art"[4] as opposed to the notion of "black" art, an idea that traces back to formations of the black consciousness movement and was later enunciated by the inception of the MEDU Art Ensemble. As a result the exhibition is discussed in relation to the catalogue it produced as a means to underscore its inference to the writing of art history. This is

[3] See Glossary in page 189

[4] See Glossary in page 189

analysed in greater detail in the subsequent chapter employing Terry King's reflections on the *Tributaries* and *Cape Town Triennial*. Furthermore, it points to an inherent debate around racial politics in that despite it being an exhibition focused on predominately black artists, other than Matsemela Manaka, there was no other black person involved in its curatorial team.

The fourth chapter, which examines the *3rd Cape Town Triennial (1988)*, explores this further by tying the common thread of the three exhibitions to the broader understanding of what the establishment of the exhibition had constituted as art. There were only three 'rural'[5] artists featured amongst other black artists in this triennial, which took the form of a large-scale exhibition. Although it created the impression of greater inclusivity and despite its blatant exclusion of black artists in the past, the triennial was viewed as an important and prestigious event. It became a launch pad for a number of artists, many of whom were white and have since become established in the South African art scene. Its framing as a national art competition - one that prescribed what should be considered acceptable as 'good' art - thus became problematic in light of its introduction of the 'rural' artists. Their entry into the competition did not only signal an exclusionary quality in the criteria imposed but it also invoked the larger debate of what constitutes 'high' art in a scenario where this understanding was determined using a particular western frameworks.

The study concludes with a return to the idea of the exhibition form as implicit to the construction of art history. As illustrated by major international exhibitions such as the *Magicien de la Terre*, this had a greater impact on how certain artists, particularly those framed as non-western, were legitimised within the western art canon. In the local context, this was compared to the *Tributaries* exhibition, which in its attempt to challenge and exercise a new constitutive function for art, played an important role in how the so called 'rural' artists of South Africa, became assimilated into the larger art historical narrative. The exhibitions discussed are here linked to institutional structures such as museums that have over the years understood and manipulated the economic advantages of large-scale exhibitions to authenticate and legitimise their importance as the final arbiters for understanding art. The exhibitions that form part of this study were selected on the basis of the common thread they share in how this sense of authentication and legitimization ultimately led to the

[5] See glossary in page 190

demise of this particular group of artists in the mainstream art scene. While the causes of the demise of these artists are not explicitly stated, this study seeks to critically engage the intersecting roles of the exhibition form and the categorisation of 'African' art in the politics of visibility and invisibility of these artists in a contemporary world.

Following a request to contribute to an anthology on art criticism in Africa, artist David Koloane responded by remarking that the concept of art criticism in South Africa is 'virtually none-existent within the broader context of the South African community' (Koloane 1998: 69). This, he explains, is because

> art discourse is and has always been the prerogative of the privileged white community whose education system has been designed according to western standards. (1998: 69)

Koloane's own writing on South African art history is important, because while it highlights the disparities and inequalities of access to training and resources, it also illustrates the gaps that still need to be filled in giving a more expanded account of the history of art produced by black people in South Africa, in both scholarship and other art institutional frameworks.

In this study I focus on three major exhibitions of South African art held in the latter half of the 1980s, to investigate more closely the concerns raised by Koloane. These concerns include the social role of art by black artists, its scholarship in institutions, and its position in institutions such as museums and galleries, all of which raise a number of interrelated concerns. Importantly for this thesis, Koloane attributes the first introduction to the art market of the 'rural' artists from the Northern and Eastern Transvaal,[6] to 'the magic realm of mythology woven around these artists by white art reviewers, researchers and spurious dealers' (Koloane 1993: 100). Koloane argues that these artists were made to represent 'the missing link between civilisation and primitivity', a romanticising tendency that, he concluded, saw artists like Jackson Hlungwani claimed to be '"the" authentic African artist' (1993: 100).

*Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South Africa Art* (1985), one of the first exhibitions to showcase these artists, in Koloane's view, presented an element of 'Otherness' in the way it featured the 'rural' artists in the exhibition. The labelling attached to this type of art, which he asserts fostered this perception, 'ultimately led to

[6] Now known as the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces

the appropriation and eventual accelerated demise of the marketability of this work as the labelling became increasingly challenged' (Koloane 1993: 101).

What is significant in Koloane's argument for this study is the way in which he problematises this labelling, which he asserts "conveniently became an appropriate aesthetic classification prompted by the ethnic concept as promoted by the government" (Koloane 1993: 101–02). His argument is substantiated not only by the fact that labels such as 'urban' or 'rural' were not applied to white artists, but also by the fact that this labelling had historical and political implications for the ways in which black South African artistic expression was viewed and subsequently written into art history.

As argued by Jane Duncan, it is clear that certain exhibitions were subject to economic and political factors, and that these played a part in how these artists and their works were received and subsequently viewed in the South African art landscape (Duncan 1994: 2). The three exhibitions that will form the core focus of this study are *Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art* (1985), *The 3rd Cape Town Triennial* (1988) and *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New South African Art History* (1989). All three share a common thread in the way in which they introduced some of the so-called 'rural' artists into the mainstream, positioning them in relation to the attendant politics of race, class, gender and representation. All of these had implications for both their immediate reception and for how South African art history was being written and was entering the global space.

There were numerous large-scale exhibitions staged during the 1980s leading up to the dawn of democracy, but what is of particular interest to this study are the subjective and aesthetic premises underpinning the inclusion, unusual at the time, of black artists labelled as 'rural'. The three exhibitions are therefore used as a means to explore how art exhibitions, particularly those dealing with representations of what is considered non-Western art, are marked by texts and assumptions that have generated particular kinds of art narratives. The exhibitions, as well as the texts they produced, provide a relevant route into this art history as they expose a range of cultural assumptions made not only by the people who produced the exhibitions, but also about the artists they included.

As a relic of the exhibition, the exhibition catalogue becomes an important tool to gain a better understanding of how exhibitions feature in and influence the

writing of art history. The exhibition catalogue, as a historical record of the artists' works that were shown, invites questions about inclusion and exclusion as well as the visibility and the reception of certain artists and art forms. The exhibition catalogue therefore plays an important role as a repository of the exhibition itself, in that it provides first-hand insight for audiences to form visual and textual connections to a historical event (Altshuler 2008: 7). As noted by Bruce Altshuler, it provides 'a more nuanced perspective than the visual representations of the exhibitions themselves, but also offers an alternate means to understanding current artistic and curatorial practices' (2008: 7).

The history of South African art has always been predominately based on a Western historical account, which was conveyed through early publications such as Esmé Berman's *Art and artists of South Africa: an illustrated biographical dictionary and historical survey of painters, sculptors & graphic artists since 1875* (1983), first published in 1970. Julie McGee claims that it was 'once considered a canonical if not an encyclopaedic document of South African art and this history' (2007: 292). In this study Berman's dictionary represents a precursor to the kinds of publications typically produced in conjunction with large-scale exhibitions, not only in terms of employing a selection process but also by implying that there are criteria informing this process that can define what constitutes 'Fine Art' and should therefore be considered as 'high' art. It remained the standard reference book on the subject of South African art, though like any reference book it became dated and now stands as a historical marker, one that, as noted by McGee's claims, assumed a Western standard of art and its processes as having legitimate universal application (McGee 2007: 293). Although not exclusively, the vast majority of artists, art movements, organisations and training centres that Berman covers were primarily part of the dominant white art establishment under apartheid. It includes entries for individual artists who merit consideration, the entries including basic biographical data, lists of major exhibitions and public collections, and a summary of the artist's life and work, with illustrations. A pictorial dictionary of South African art, it offers a narrative view covering artists from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century, but excludes the majority of black artists. Yet it became a useful resource for many academics in the field of art history in South Africa until the late 1970s when new scholarly research began to emerge and establish new narratives.

These new narratives not only delineated a particular history of African art[7], but also, one could argue, in so doing prompted exhibitions like *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), which, like its predecessor, '*Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984),[8] was critiqued and criticised for its apparent attempt to exonerate the appropriation of African art by modernist white male European artists. The two exhibitions not only featured prominently in 20th century art history, but also raised particular debates around representations of African art and the way it was being received in the art world at the time. Whilst the latter highlighted the formalist aspects of 'primitivism' built on its association between traditional art masks as precursors to and sources for forms employed by Western modernist white male artists, the former refers to how this informed the conditions in which contemporary African art entered the global art market. Nonetheless, whereas *Magiciens de la Terre* placed an emphasis on broadening the notion of modernity, *Primitivism* instead sought to maintain that modernity belonged solely to white male artists. The two exhibitions thus point to two possible contexts within which to debate the consequences of the entry of African objects from ethnographic museums into Western art establishments. The first is that while the issues raised by these exhibitions began to stimulate new scholarly research that sought to establish a new terrain in African art studies, they simultaneously became part of a deliberate strategy to mobilise an intellectual reasoning that would develop a particular lexicon of scholarship and knowledge base about specific art forms. Secondly, because of the vastness of African art expressions, the exhibitions created the conditions for canon formations, where, as argued by Julie McGee, in the South African context it was revealed that

> black and indigenous art has not only folded into a canon modified principally outside of South Africa but also sketched the interrelationships of art history, colonialism and apartheid in South Africa. (McGee 2007: 292)

Terms associated with African art, such as 'primitive', 'naïve', 'rural', 'transitional' and so on, do not only emerge from the colonial roots of art history, but also,

[7] See glossary in page 189

[8] *'Primitivism' in 20th century art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* was held at the Museum of Modern Art from September 1984–January 1985. It was directed by William Rubin, director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture in collaboration with Professor Kirk Varnedoe of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Philip Morris Incorporated sponsored it with additional sponsorship from the National Endowment for the Arts. See Chapter 2: Exhibition Histories.

following artist Garth Erasmus's argument, illustrate how in South Africa 'the history of art *as received* is the history of colonialism' (Erasmus cited by McGee 2007: 289). As pointed out by McGee, in addition to providing the foundation for the professionalisation of Fine Arts, Western European epistemologies have been, and still are to a large degree, defining the visual arts in South Africa as they do the rest of the world (McGee 2007: 289). The lack of disruption of this foundation, she argues, has raised concerns that as indicated earlier illustrated

> the historical position of black artistic practice and black South African voices on the periphery and the development of a 'canon' underclass with its own set of meanings, values, and expectations, one that evolved alongside and through the white and Western-dominated South African episteme. (McGee 2007: 290)

On the one hand one could argue that the scholarly research of the early 1980s debunking these perceptions was also an attempt at demystifying the notion of 'primitivism' associated with the work of black artists; however, in the South African context, in many ways it reinforced, if not propagated, particular ideas about black artists (both urban[9] and 'rural') and the kinds of works they produced and, more importantly, particular modes of writing about them. As a result, when *Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art* opened in 1985 in an old municipal building in Newtown, Johannesburg, it was inexorably immersed in the institutional purviews established by an exhibition like '*Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal*, which were later interrogated by the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition.

In her research tracing the reception of some 'rural' artists working in Limpopo,[10] Jane Duncan describes the year *Tributaries* opened as crucial, as it 'effectively "launched" these artists on the road to prominence' (Duncan 1994: 39). Her thesis, she claims, is an attempt to prove that there is a range of social factors that influence the promotion of particular art works at any given time. She argues that *Tributaries* would not have had such a lasting impression had it not been followed up immediately by other institutions promoting these artists (1994: 40). While this stands true, I revise this by arguing instead that the exhibition was essentially afforded its high status through its inclusion of these artists and the fact that it facilitated their debut and reception into the art market. While Duncan asserts that the promotional

[9] See glossary in page 190

[10] A province in the northern part of South Africa, formerly known as the Northern Transvaal and then the Northern Province.

activities around these artists were clearly inspired by the exhibition and largely prompted by certain individuals, she does not, however, make it explicit that firstly, these individuals were white patrons, and secondly, that such white patronage is implicit in the market-related imperatives that have governed the trading of African art within a largely Western art market. While Duncan acknowledges the importance of buyers and the role they play in the chain of production, she admits that her discussion of this aspect of the subject is somewhat inconclusive (1994: 98). Duncan addressed the role of the 'white patron' through a discussion of the collector and through the notion of 'transitional paraphernalia'. She did not, however, address the ways this predominantly white patronage shaped the way the work of the 'rural' artists' art was authenticated within art history discourse, and the institutions that played a part in the formulation of this history. This is the focus of my thesis.

It is important to note that while the three exhibitions were distinctively different from each other in various ways, all three shared commonalities with respect to intentionality and the conditions predetermined by sponsorship and policy. My assertion, following on from Duncan, is that the common features they shared were centred on the inclusion and/or exclusion of peripheral art and artists (in this case 'rural' artists) in exhibitions and the art market. However, what Duncan did not consider is how these conditions arose and what constituted their uniqueness, and as asked by McGee, 'what mechanisms of legitimization are or should be in place to secure the canonisation of indigenous knowledge' (McGee 2007: 290) within a broad overview of contemporary South African art. The large-scale exhibitions in this study, I argue, had a significant impact on how a particular history of South African art was legitimised through the inclusion of certain artists. This is not to say that the curators and the artists involved do not play a part in constructing the exhibitions themselves, but rather that the way in which such inclusions and exclusions were made within these exhibitions begs a larger inquiry around the socioeconomic circumstances of the artists.

By looking at the work of black 'rural' artists in South Africa, many of whom were included in these art exhibitions, I aim to explain why some or most of these artists have since been reduced to extremely minor entries in the much larger archive of South African art-historical writing and have disappeared from the mainstream market. With the exception of a handful of these artists, there appears to have been

very little written about them except in the context of these exhibitions. I will investigate the content and contexts of these exhibitions so as to determine their role in generating written commentary and critiques that established differentials, which I argue, were at play in the ways in which 'rural' black artists were included and received. This may further explain why these artists have subsequently disappeared from view.

While questioning why certain artists were promoted in national exhibitions during this period, this research seeks also to investigate why particular ideas were foregrounded as the motives for promoting 'rural' black artists. This promotion was often critiqued in relation to major art institutions in South Africa, which were seen to be presenting themselves as in keeping with changing trends by promoting themselves as inclusive and as presenting something new to the international art market. The works of these artists thus offered a new way through which the South African art market could re-present itself to the world.

This study also reflects on the role of art museums as institutions, and although this is not discussed in great detail, in the case of an art institution such as the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) it illustrates how through the display of art and written texts, art museums and galleries have the potential to generate and frame particular kinds of art-historical narratives. It is clear from some writing about these exhibitions, especially in print media like newspaper reviews and journal articles, that they shared a common desire to illustrate a specific picture about the general overview of South African art at the time. The literature review will thus not only look at the amount of coverage these exhibitions received but also at the *kind* of coverage they received due to the inclusion of certain artists.

This, I argue, was primarily due to their status as 'ground-breaking', but can also be seen as part of a strategy to be 'demographically viable' in an attempt to (politically) redress South Africa's exclusionary history within cultural spaces. In order to substantiate this claim, this study argues in a variety of ways that these exhibitions received extensive coverage because of their scale and because the historical account provided through this reportage was streamed into establishing a particular South African art-historical narrative. An undemanding critique of this narrative could follow a 'pre- to post-apartheid' scenario, where one can easily point to specific examples to illustrate the conversion from being exclusive to being

inclusive; however, this study seeks to interrogate the hegemony over particular kinds of cultural productions and art histories of certain artists in South Africa. While there had been numerous black artists participating and exhibiting in exhibitions in white establishments as early as the 1940s, the 1980s are significant years in the history of South African art because for the first time black 'rural' artists became visible when they were suddenly included in major exhibitions alongside both white and black urban artists. The three case studies this study will consider are an attempt to show that the attitudes conveyed by the reception of these exhibitions and the black 'rural' artists they featured, as reflected through their associated historical texts, have played a contributory role in the transmission of cultural values in art history.

Not only did all three exhibitions receive substantial financial and corporate support, but in many respects they were also deemed 'ground-breaking' in that they were seen to be providing a comprehensive overview of what 'contemporary' South African art is. The *Tributaries* exhibition was sponsored by BMW South Africa and opened in an old municipal space that was renovated to accommodate it inside the Africana Museum (now MuseuMAfricA) in Newtown, Johannesburg. Curated by Ricky Burnett, the exhibition featured one hundred and eleven artists, mainly urban, but some 'rural', of a variety of educational, class and religious backgrounds. It was accompanied by a catalogue that included images of works as well as biographies of the artists. It included both 'traditional' and 'contemporary' works that were selected and curated as an overall impression of South African 'contemporary' art at the time; the selection could thus be contested, as it was largely a subjective exercise conducted by one person acting alone, and only occasionally on the advice of others. *Tributaries* therefore occupies an important moment that has become a significant marker in South Africa's art history. It re-emerges in text as a kind of arbiter, a defining moment when the paradigms of South Africa's contemporary art[11] landscape shifted both locally and internationally. Although it is a precursor in that it came before the Paris exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, *Tributaries* shares many similarities with the latter because of the kinds of questions they both raised in relation to representations of the 'other' within Western art institutional frameworks. Such representations not only created a set of assumptions, but activated these in a manner that came to frame what is understood as 'contemporary' art from the continent. In an article that appears to be

[11] See Glossary in page 189

preoccupied with dismantling this notion, Olabisi Silva addresses a question initially posed by John Povey, the editor of *Africa Arts*: 'What are we going to do about contemporary African Arts?' (Silva 1996: 1). While the question may suggest that the issue has not been addressed, it also raises the question of what constitutes 'contemporary' African art and thus resonates with the ideological frameworks of these two exhibitions as a means to also interrogate the inclusion of so-called 'rural' artists into the mainstream art market.

The *Cape Town Triennial* was staged in 1988 as a national art competition and was the subject of extensive interest, mainly because it inaugurated public debates around inclusivity and exclusivity and what constitutes a prizeworthy artwork. The competition emerged from attempts by the staff of the National Gallery and the regional branch of the South African Association of Arts in Cape Town to hold regular exhibitions that would reflect the complete spectrum of South African visual art, and, due to financial constraints from public sources, was privately sponsored by the Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation. The exhibitions travelled nationally to various institutions. However, although it was seen as one of the most prestigious national competitions to present contemporary art produced in South Africa, it came under criticism for political and technical weakness, and a large portion of its media coverage was dominated by these debates.

A year later *The Neglected Tradition*, sponsored by The Donald Gordon Trust, First National Bank, The Friends of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Southern Life and an anonymous donation, was staged at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1989, one of the oldest and most important galleries in South Africa. It was conceptualised as an attempt to make up for past exclusions from major art collections of art by black artists. However, although its primary focus was inclusivity, this notion was nevertheless approached through a Western understanding of art and was influenced by the institution's attempt to redeem itself from its exclusive past to become part of a changing political sphere. It is probably the best researched of the three exhibitions, as it included an extensive bibliography and biographical information on the artists it presented. It also presented a wide range of artworks and artists from different backgrounds but focused specifically on art created by black African artists, both urban and 'rural'.

As a result of these exhibitions the 1980s became a defining decade within the narrative of South African art history, as art writers and critics began paying closer attention to the state of South Africa's cultural landscape. The large-scale exhibitions I examine can thus be argued to have formed a significant part of South African art history as they were claimed to have challenged the gaps in museums and other institutions, which (with some exceptions) had not until then included substantial acquisitions of art by black 'rural' artists.

My research question also demands a broader discussion of and dialogue with postcolonial theories on museums and the exhibitions they produce as cultural signifiers. In this context I extend the research that examines whether exhibitions play a significant role in determining particular kinds of art-historical narratives, especially through the written commentary they produce. The canonisation of art history and its construction is consequently a pivotal feature in arguing how these artists were constructed and described, and how this may have contributed to their inclusion in (and subsequent exclusion from) the mainstream art market today.

## CHAPTER ONE: EXHIBITION HISTORIES

The subjective nature of collecting, accessioning and display has made exhibitions a contested terrain, especially, but not only, when it comes to the representation of 'other' cultures. The contentiousness arises because, in their construction, exhibitions emerged from a (Western) canon that poses a different set of challenges for curators of African art from those faced by curators of Western art. Traditionally, art exhibitions have primarily been staged in art museums and art galleries. This means that the curators associated with or in charge of these museums and galleries have largely determined their content. According to Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (1991: 3–4), the main criticism aimed at curators of inclusive art exhibitions in postcolonial and postmodern critiques has been that they tend to make the exhibitions, as well as the institutions at which the exhibitions are held, the final arbiters of what is collected, exhibited and as a result kept for public memory.

In the contemporary South African context, understanding museum culture has evolved through debates around museum collections and questions of inclusion. These debates were prompted by the conditions leading up to the dawn of democracy, when, as artist and curator Bongi Dhlomo recalls, institutions like JAG gradually began to review their acquisition policies, primarily as a result of the changing political landscape, and to include a substantial number of artworks by black artists. Following a request from then director Christopher Till to join the Art Gallery Committee (AGC), Dhlomo notes how prior to the task of redress in terms of filling the 'gaps' in its collection, the committee had already 'embarked on defining what kinds of art-making had to be included in its collections' (Dhlomo 2010: 36). While this was directed at mainly traditional objects and those formerly considered as craft, Dhlomo observes how this reconsideration of the past acquisition policy not only encouraged a shift in the nature of what constitutes art in South Africa but also in how institutions like JAG began to expand their collections to reflect this (Dhlomo 2010: 36). These shifts were not only encouraged by the staging of large-scale exhibitions that featured certain artists and art forms, but also reflected the changing attitudes to how museums presented exhibitions to audiences. As museums began shifting from their traditional, temple-like status to their function as forums for critical engagement (Cameron in Karp & Lavine 1991: 3–4), many art museums appear to have remained

'fixated on a universalist aesthetic' (Karp & Lavine 1991: 4), making exhibitions a rich area to explore questions around the representation, classification and formations of canons. Many of these issues have been explored by a number of art critics, historians and museum practitioners (such as Mary Nooter Roberts (Nooter Roberts, Vogel & Müller 1994) and Susan Vogel (1991)), most of whom have engaged critically with museology practices related to curating and its theoretical underpinning, usually through art history. In the field of African art, curators and critics such as Olabisi Silva (1996), and Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe (1999), have debated these issues in the context of the ways in which some African artists' work has been presented to the international and national high/Fine Art exhibition circuit.

My study considers a series of South African art exhibitions, in which I argue the 'rural' artists were featured in relation to two sets of frameworks that may offer a more in-depth reading of their work. The first is a postmodernist appraisal that explores the idea of large-scale exhibitions in relation to systems of classification and canonisation, particularly in relation to the idea of 'contemporary' African art. Here I raise questions that are relevant to prevailing debates about constructs of 'modernity' in relation to exhibition histories and the way African art has been included in these platforms. The second draws from Simon Gikandi's insight concerning postcolonial theory: if these exhibitions are considered as texts in history, they start to function as part of what he observes is a claim to modernity that, like other discourses such as cultural studies, ethnic and feminist studies, reveals how modernity itself has shaped postcolonial and postmodernist thinking (Gikandi 2000: 87). According to Gikandi, 'postcolonial theory sprouted from postmodernist thinking that functions under the anxiety of modernity and its universal theories of reason, history, and the human subject' (2000: 87). The 'anxiety of modernity' is in this case best illustrated through Rasheed Araeen's perspective of how modernity is, in the example of the *Magiciens de le terre* exhibition, employed to advance the dominant western hegemony over the delineation of modernism. Araeen later expanded this argument in an open letter to African thinkers, theorists and art historians where he argued that "the west has ignored and continues to ignore Africa's real and great contribution to human civilisation" (Araeen 2004). This, he argues, is especially the case when it comes to Africa's contribution to modernism in the visual arts. Thus the challenge he presents

to African historians is to establish Africa's place in modernism's history. Modern art history, as argued by Araeen, is "constructed and legitimised on the basis of formal innovations, among other things…" (Araeen 2004) This however, he claims, continues to erase the artistic production of Africa. The anxieties of modernity, although discussed through post-modernist and post-colonial thinking, include the 'usance' of its theories and ideologies by the very same philosophical framework and position of Eurocentric modern art history it wishes to disrupt.

My inquiry thus seeks to explore some of these 'anxieties' through a consideration of selected rural artists' work and how this work has been documented and described in what Gikandi describes as those 'powerful moments when postcolonial theory tries to rewrite and reread the experiences and discourse of modernity' (2000: 87). Given that the exhibitions I refer to no longer exist and that for the most part the artists they represented were often silent, particularly with regard to the meanings attached to their work, I focus on the written commentary produced for and by these exhibitions. By employing a postcolonial reading through some of the literature in this study, the aim is to highlight that although exhibitions can in some ways be considered documentations of art history, they are also part of a dominant Western cultural praxis which, like postcolonial theory, as Gikandi points out, 'is in association with the establishment of European hegemony over the rest of the world, and therefore needs to be purged of its Eurocentricism' (2000: 87). I therefore argue that this approach could offer a means to elucidate the conditions that led to the inclusion of the rural-based South African artists into large-scale exhibitions during the 1980s and their subsequent incorporation into the broader South African art-historical narrative and art market.

In the *Africus:Johannesburg Biennale* catalogue, art historian Anitra Nettleton refers to the 1980s as the 'watershed' years in that they became a defining moment in South Africa's art history, not only because art writers and critics began paying closer attention to the state of art in South Africa, but also because these exhibitions signified a nationalistic turning point in support of the arts. They received a substantial amount of state and private support through funding and infrastructural support from a variety of institutions. The exhibitions that form part of this study, *Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art* (1985) and *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New South African Art History* (1989), are particularly

significant because, along with national art competitions like the *Cape Town Triennial* (1988), they were claimed as providing the most comprehensive overview of contemporary South African art at the time. In this chapter I discuss the status as well as the intentions of these exhibitions in relation to debates that were emerging around African art in general, but I concentrate specifically on these particular South African examples. This focus serves as a means to determine the differentials I argue were at play in defining and determining certain artists' participation — particularly those labelled as 'rural'.

In their anthology, Karp and Lavine (1991: 3–4) examine the extent to which exhibitions and their producers are able to challenge the right of institutions to control and determine the representation of 'other' cultures. They examine whether exhibitions convey attitudes analogous to those of their viewers in using the 'familiar presentational styles perceived as appropriate for such audiences by the producers of these exhibitions' (1991: 3–4). Their discussion draws attention to two critical ideas I employ as part of this study — reception and visibility — because they inform exhibition culture in particular ways. Both ideas are also part of the larger exploration of the role of exhibitions in constructing narratives and framing perceptions about 'other' cultures, in particular non-Western cultures within Western institutions. Although Karp and Lavine's views are based on studies in an American context, they make valid points that may be applied to similar situations in the art of Africa and the African diaspora. They argue that debates around multiculturalism and interculturalism will remain unresolved within museum spaces because while exhibitions have the potential to present multiple perspectives, they also bear the burden of being representative of an entire group or region (Karp & Lavine 1991: 6–7). Karp and Lavine also highlight the challenges faced by museum curators tasked with finding ways to accommodate these multiple perspectives in such a way that would

> strengthen institutions that give more control to populations to decide how they want to be represented but also expand the expertise of established museums in the presentation of non-Western cultures and minority cultures. (Karp & Lavine 1991: 6)

This chapter attempts to highlight how in many ways the debates discussed by Karp and Lavine had already been stimulated by the exhibitions discussed in this study. Issues around multiculturalism in particular had been raised by the *Tributaries*

exhibition in 1985, which I discuss in relation to the Paris exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* held a few years later in 1989. Although staged at different periods and for differing locales, the two exhibitions share similarities in that they sought to represent heterogeneity, but instead reinforced certain misconceptions, not only about non-Western art, but also its relationship to the West. My assertion is that, following their staging, the two exhibitions became sites from which to interrogate some of the presuppositions present in the representation of non-Western contemporary art within Western art institutional structures. Some of this 'non-Western' art has, however, subsequently been made in and absorbed into these same structures that, Sharlene Khan argues, are devised to 'gatekeep Africa' (2007: 51). Khan makes her argument in relation to curatorial subjectivity but she also points out that

> curators who have selected works from African countries to represent the continent in massive exhibitions have often been criticised for perpetuating the very same stereotypes that they themselves have tried to challenge. (2007: 51-52)

The discussion of the representations of 'other' cultures in large-scale exhibitions, as shown by Khan and pointed out by Karp and Lavine, raises questions about the role of curators who engage with these 'other' contexts. Curators are important to the processes that elucidate the fundamental principles that have governed perceptions of non-Western art in the contemporary realm. Khan's and Karp and Lavine's arguments not only offer a means to question the way structures like exhibitions have 'merely rehearsed traditional Western ways of organising experience' (Karp & Lavine 1991: 7), but also contribute to 'an attempt to look at more effective ways of acquainting audiences with the areas involved' (1991: 7). Part of this acquaintance, as noted by Karp, requires that audiences are made aware that

> exhibitions are inevitably organised on the basis of assumptions about the intentions of the objects' producers, the cultural skills and qualification of the audience, the claims to authoritativeness made by the exhibition, and judgements of the aesthetic merit or authenticity of the objects or settings exhibited. (Karp 1991: 12)

Karp's discussion essentially highlights the assumed power of museums and the exhibitions they present as the ultimate motif and setting for representing art and the culture of 'other' subjects (1991: 12). This, as he points out, does not necessarily take away from the definitions of a museum or the exhibition and the opportunities both

offer in representing other kinds of experiences (Karp 1991: 12); nonetheless, these definitions require some kind of elaboration as to how such structures function in debates, particularly around representation.

Khan, on the other hand, focuses on the place of contemporary African art in the larger context of international, large-scale exhibitions and makes this a political question to illustrate the dilemmas curators often have to face when featuring African art in such exhibitions. It seems that the issue is not so much whether exhibitions and the spaces that host them are politically or historically loaded, but rather that 'museums and their exhibitions are generally expected to be morally neutral, yet in practice they always make moral statements' (Karp 1991: 14). The result is that, as illustrated by Khan, the possibilities that such exhibitions could offer other experiences are ultimately restrictive. But, as Karp points out, even when art removes itself from moral codes, 'there remains an implied judgement of ideas about what is and is not subject to certain forms of criticism' (Karp 1991: 14). It is this assumed neutrality, he observes, that enables exhibitions to function as both 'instruments of power as well as instruments of education and experience' (Karp 1991: 14).

This historical context, although placed outside of Africa, is key to the kinds of debates that shaped a particular understanding of how African art features in large-scale exhibitions designed primarily from a western praxis. This, as argued from this view, influenced the inquiry as why the 'rural' artists have remained in a peculiar locus of South African art institutions and contemporary art scene. The exhibitions discussed in this study are thus presented to foreground similar issues ensued by conditions that are denoted within the politics of exhibition histories.

It is important to note that except for the *Tributaries* exhibition, the large-scale exhibitions that form part of this study were held within art institutions. Yet it is also significant that with *Tributaries*, a space was constructed specifically to display the works. For this reason it is necessary to give a brief historical context of the institutional relationship between museums and contemporary African art exhibitions during this period, particularly those that took place in settings outside Africa. As Nooter Roberts and others involved in the 'Exhibition-*ism*' project noted, the 'issues raised by museums and African art stand at the nexus of some of the most compelling debates in contemporary culture today' (Nooter Roberts *et al.* 1994: 10). The 'Exhibition-*ism*' project, as stated by its curators, essentially sought to 'question how

the act of looking is enacted within museums' (Nooter Roberts *et al.* 1994: 9). As Nooter Roberts asks in relation to historical/ 'traditional' African art,

> who creates meaning for African art? How is it contextualised within (western) museums? More importantly, whether exhibitions are frames for displaying and presenting objects, or do they create meanings for these objects and thereby have a life of their own? (Nooter Roberts *et al.* 1994: 10)

Nooter Roberts draws our attention to the idea of the exhibition as a politicised space, 'a subject of intellectual and artistic inquiry' Nooter Roberts et al. 1994: 23), but also to a shift in museum practice, where she notes that 'the concern is no longer strictly with "exhibited culture" but also "exhibition culture"' (Nooter Roberts et al. 1994: 23).

It is important to be critical of the questions a project like 'Exhibition-*ism*' raised, as they also came with some contradictions. However, it is also necessary to note that although Nooter Roberts *et al.* were dealing with issues related to particular historical and traditional African art forms, what is significant is that some of the debates they present are relevant to the realm of contemporary art from Africa and the way it has been curated. While the project problematises the act of looking itself by concluding that this is primarily a Western way of seeing and therefore inappropriate for an African context, the curators admittedly draw from 'western theatrical practice as a way of inviting a non-visual and experiential response from the audience' (Nooter Roberts *et al.* 1994: 54). It is an approach that not only implies that the curators were not necessarily concerned with the innate power relations between 'traditional' African art and the Western structure of the museum, but also becomes contradictory in the exhibition's claim to be non-authoritative. Nooter Roberts suggests that there is no presentation that is definitive (Nooter Roberts *et al.* 1994: 25), but if one also considers her argument that 'exhibitions comprise of a series of choices made by a given group of people at a particular time and place' (Nooter Roberts *et al.* 1994: 25), then it is possible to conclude that exhibitions (particularly those of non-Western art) are based on particular Western, European epistemologies.

One could, following from this, mount the argument that, because of the controversial nature of exhibitions of African art that have a particular narrative or lineage — those seeking either to maintain or contest the idea that modernism was solely a Eurocentric ideal — such exhibitions can be considered as either 'a response

to' or 'a continuation of' concerns raised by previous exhibitions.[12] As observed by Rasheed Araeen in the case of *Magiciens de la Terre*, the attempt to correct earlier assumptions prompted by anthropology and 'otherness' was what primarily informed the main objectives of the exhibition. However, his concern over the preoccupation with these assumptions was that it 'tends to distract attention from the fundamental issues of the relationship between the globally dominant Western culture and other cultures' (Araeen 2013: 238). In other words, the premise that the exhibition was intent on highlighting the relationship between the 'centre' and 'periphery' was ultimately complicated by the inequalities that exist between the two. Araeen goes on to question the forum where this exchange takes place and whether it does indeed allow for such a relationship to be challenged (2013: 239), a question that Nooter Roberts's study somewhat evades. Despite this, Nooter Roberts does offer an important argument that presents a moment of contradiction that happens within exhibitions, where they simultaneously become part of a process of revelation and disclosure (Nooter Roberts *et al.* 1994: 32). In highlighting these inconsistencies, she not only alludes to the relationships between knowledge, power and art but also places particular emphasis on the mechanisms of reception, interpretation, codification and knowledge accumulation (Nooter Roberts *et al.* 1994: 32). It is within these oppositions, I suggest, that the exhibitions in this study function, where similar relationships of power and contestation play out and intersect in ways that affect our understanding of the artists and their works.

All three of the South African exhibitions under discussion can be considered both multicultural[13] and cross-cultural[14] in that a range of concerns around race, representation, and gender intersected within them — although each served a specific purpose and presented a wide range of artistic productions, all of which, I argue, was in some way attempting to formulate and provide a view of contemporary South African art at the time. In light of this it is worth considering these exhibitions as part of a genealogy of events that ultimately constructed and disseminated a particular kind of history. Therefore, my study follows the chronological order of the exhibitions

[12] In the catalogue accompanying the *Exhibition-ism* exhibition, Nooter Roberts describes the project as a response to, if not a continuation of, the *Art/artefact* exhibition; similarly, *Magiciens de la Terre* is often discussed as a response to *Primitivism* (Nooter Roberts *et al.* 1994: 24).

[13] See glossary in page 189

[14] See glossary in page 189

in order to explain this lead to a 'historical peak', which, I argue, resulted in the staging of yet another significant 'large-scale' exhibition — the first Johannesburg Biennale in 1995 — in which the 'rural' artists did not feature as prominently there as they did in the second biennale exhibitions collectively titled *Trade Routes: History and Geography* (1997). As I will discuss later in the chapter, despite their imagined significance in South Africa's visual art landscape, the biennales in the end presented a discombobulated idea of the state of South African visual art that David Koloane claims 'did nothing to interrupt the formidable set of cultural and political assumptions that contributed to the disempowerment of Black South Africans' (2003: 124). While this view is contestable since it requires navigation through the politics of a South African parochialism and exceptionalism, the general reflections expressed on the biennales as part of a political debate that signifies culture as part of a democratic transformation are inapt precisely because they did not address a deeper inquiry of how the biennales had an impact on both the past and present South African art discourse.

Koloane's views on the biennales are thus important, not only because he is a trained and experienced curator but also because he was one of the few black writers at the time writing critically from a black perspective on the subject. He argues that while the approach to the biennales 'has brought in its wake a new form of expression' (2003: 125) it also encompassed in it 'a new form of aesthetic exclusion' (2003: 125). What is significant about Koloane's observation for this study, is that the biennales not only affirmed the place of black South African art in the global context, but in so doing somehow established themselves in the 'assumed role of being the "CNN" of the visual arts' (Koloane 2003: 126). Like all the other major exhibitions that preceded them, both biennales received critiques that evoked what Lucy Steeds envisages as 'moments to investigate … raptures and discontinuities afresh' (Steeds 2013: 25). She argues that because they characteristically raise new sets of questions, such exhibitions and their critiques could be used to explain the context of the art production and the exhibiting cultures of a particular historical epoch. In the case of the 'rural' artists, these 'ruptures and discontinuities' could further help to explain the particular political and aesthetic perspectives that were employed to appropriate their work, and which I argue, ultimately led to their demise in the mainstream art world.

## 2.1 African art and large-scale exhibitions

The making of the Johannesburg biennale is not a primary focus of this study; it is, however, necessary to include in this chapter because it is part of 'a historical peak' in the narrative of large-scale exhibitions staged in South Africa. It is described as such not only because this was the first biennale of this scale to be held in South Africa, but also because, as stated in the intentions of the subsequent biennale, it was 'celebrating South Africa's re-entry into the world cultural arena'(1997: 3). The first biennale therefore also opened its doors to other African countries to participate. It became a moment of re-definition where South Africa and the rest of the African continent could re-imagine a new art narrative in the eyes of the international arena. Biennales may differ in their origins, appointments, conceptualisation and programming however they are derived from the idea of exhibitions, which have become "*the* medium through which most art becomes known" (Greenberg *et al.* 1996: 2). The first Johannesburg biennale was held in 1995 and the second in 1997. The second biennale (1997), in which the 'rural' artists featured more prominently, was viewed as an important contemporary art event, one that solicited various projects and programmes centred on six core exhibitions at venues in Johannesburg and Cape Town. It differed from its predecessor because it steered away from the established convention of organising the exhibitions in terms of national pavilions, opting instead to deconstruct this curatorial practice. *Trade Routes: History and Geography* thus not only shifted the traditional format of a biennale but also thereby offered a means to view the exhibitions it presented through a range of diverse media. In discussing the two biennales it is therefore important to delineate the distinction between the two as they were informed by varying conceptual and ideological frameworks.

The first biennale, *Africus*, is here set in relation to the case studies under discussion as a precedent of how South Africa art was shifting towards a more inclusive and expansive approach towards the global landscape. It came shortly after the first democratic election in 1994 and in many ways sought to encapsulate the sentiment of the time, what Koloane describes as South Africa's 'dawn of a new day' (Koloane 1996: 144) The sense of optimism carried in this celebratory stage also set off the prominence of large-scale exhibitions in both the local and global arena with the staging of exhibitions such as *Art from South Africa* curated by David Elliot at the

Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and *Seven Stories* (1990) devised by the White Chapel Gallery in London (1995). These took a similar surveying approach to that articulated by earlier exhibitions such as the ones that form the main body of this study. The historical peak thus manifested itself through questions the biennale invoked in its quest to define a South African expression, one that, as pointed by Koloane, could transcend the paradigms of 'a society virtually divided into two distinct and separate worlds' (Koloane, 1996: 144).

While accounts of the first biennale illustrate a genuine attempt by the organizers to be highly inclusive, in a review of the catalogue Garth Claassen notes how it uncovered the difficulty of trying to assemble a publication made up of diverse artistic expression (Claassen 1997: 89). Claassen raises some critical points related to the nature of biennales and the catalogue as characteristic of a record that remains after a large-scale exhibition. The common format, which includes a roster of participating artist along with brief biographies and bibliographical information on each, is followed, albeit with instances where references and additional information is omitted or incomplete.

The hundred or so exhibitions featured in the first Johannesburg biennale, although carefully researched, are according to his review inadequately documented by the catalogue which aimed to give the reader some impression of the exhibition installation. The inadequate documentation, he explains, is furthermore exacerbated by an incongruent layout, as well as a lack of consideration of its contributors and the link of their submissions to the overall intentions of the biennale. As a result, he adds, the catalogue comes across as though it was "developed as justification for the exhibition rather than as a publication in its own right with a set of clearly defined goals" (Claassen 1997: 87). In addition to framing the biennale in a particular way, the catalogue is therefore important because 'once the show is over it is the single most comprehensive record of the exhibition and thinking of the organizers' (Claassen 1997: 87).

The catalogue also offers a means to determine the political role of exhibitions. The premise set by the first Johannesburg biennale for the following one, for example, can also be traced back to the catalogue in order to gauge the success of the exhibition. The second Johannesburg biennale therefore faced similar obstacles in terms of accessibility, all of which was compounded by a programme that was overly

complicated and incoherent. The 1997 biennale was not a repetition of the first. It took a different shape in that it broke with the typical biennale being instead philosophically structured to reflect the artistic director's concept. It featured six major exhibitions[15] curated by both local and international curators in venues in both Cape Town and Johannesburg with the majority of the exhibitions situated in the Newtown Precinct.

The second Johannesburg biennale also presented its own set of issues, which were similarly revealed by the responses and critique it received. It also revealed the imbalances of the political and cultural issues underpinning the South African art narrative that continues to cater and for a small minority of the educated elite. One of the main criticisms it received was that it placed too much emphasis on an international audience and showed a lack of concern for the basic needs of the larger South African population. The second biennale was different from the first in terms of both its structure and themes, this along with its short-lived duration, made it idiosyncratic. As it was also the last Johannesburg biennale, it did not display the typical repetitive nature of a biennale but instead became an epoch-making moment in the history of South African art, one that has since shaped its narrative in particular ways. One of these ways was suggested by Natasha Becker in a presentation examining this legacy, and the events leading up to and after these first two and only biennales ever staged in South Africa (Becker 2008). By mapping the trajectory that led to the biennales, Becker discusses some of the issues that emerged from exhibitions like *Tributaries* and *The Neglected Tradition*, which were labelled as 'revisionist'. One of her concerns is that these exhibitions 'were primarily forged out of a political imagination and [were] thus inaccurate and not a true reflection of the social history of the groups they sought to represent' (Becker 2008).

She argues that in order to understand the political and ideological frameworks produced by large-scale exhibitions such as the biennales, alternative methodologies that fall outside of art-historical methods need to be employed so as to present an expanded overview of representation and constructs of knowledge. The methodologies she proposes thus look closely at power relations within these

[15] Trade Routes: History and Geography consisted of the following six exhibitions: *Alternating Currents* curated by Okwui Enwenzor, *Important and Exported* curated by Gerardo Mosquera, *Graft* curated by Colin Richards, *Hong Kong, etc.* curated by Hon Hanru, *Life's Little Necessities* curated by Killie Jones and *Transversions* curated by Yu Yeon Kim.

exhibitions, but also interrogate how these relations were further convoluted by the complexities of having a history of politics around race, representation and 'othering'. She also observes that

> it was almost inevitable that the power and resources afforded to such exhibitions would fall into the hands of institutions and curators that are not from the cultures they represent precisely because they were formed out of a nationalistic understanding of art. (Becker 2008)

The result, she notes, is that the biennales were largely inaccurate although they have since become entrenched in the narrative about contemporary South African art (Becker 2008). While the politics of cultural nationalism embedded in her argument can offer a productive reading of the biennales, it also tends to suggest a more sociological analysis rather than providing a more nuanced account of how these featured the 'rural' artists. The views articulated by both Becker and Koloane differ in some ways in that each is reflecting on the variances of the exhibition phenomenon from specific backgrounds informed by their interaction at different times with the South African art historical narrative. The issues they both highlight however, are indicative of the anomalies the two biennales presented, particularly in terms of the conventions and multiple forms they took as large-scale or mega-exhibitions.

The biennales are thus cast as important in the understanding of the three case studies because they do not only represent the aftermath of these large-scale exhibitions but also in their framing as exhibitions featured the 'rural' artists discussed in this study in particular ways. The first biennale included a number of the 'rural' artists mentioned in this discussion in its programme. However this was underscored by the general sentiment of optimism and greater inclusivity anchored in the idea of the biennale as part of a larger national project of nation building and social cohesion. The presence of the 'rural' artists thus served a particular purpose in the larger narrative of the biennale, and this was made evident by in the fact that, by the second biennale, they were almost entirely erased from the broader South African contemporary art scene and made imperceptible by the immensity of the international focus of the exhibitions. It gave the impression that South Africa had not only turned its lens towards the world but also shifted towards constituting itself along a more global landscape.

Becker's account of some of the issues underlying the biennales further explains why they were short-lived, but she does not elaborate on some of the important facets of the biennales, particularly with regards to which criteria were used in deciding which artists would participate. Elaborating the intricacies of artistic practice in the South African landscape could provide a better understanding of the legacies created by these exhibitions. The Johannesburg Biennales are thus discussed here as a way of concluding the discussion about large-scale exhibitions and why these featured prominently as a culmination of certain specificities of South Africa's cultural landscape. The biennales in many ways revealed the socioeconomic and political conditions under which the exhibitions of the late 1980s were mounted, where questions of redress and inclusivity had become part of the agenda of South African art institutions. The questions of redress and inclusivity, I argue, played out in the three exhibitions I am considering because one of their main objectives was to highlight the further question of who is included as participants in the discussions fostered by the exhibitions and, more importantly, how the resultant exclusions ought to be addressed and possibly rectified.

The question of inclusion also implicates methods of classification, in that what is to be considered for inclusion first needs to be categorised and classified in accordance with the framework of the exhibition as the curators preconceive it. Classificatory principles, as observed by Sidney Kasfir, may be necessary 'to organize a large body of material, but in some instances they have the potential to obscure some correspondences while illuminating others' (1992: 44). In looking at 'traditional' African art, she observes, this process has largely been guided by the use of the dichotomies of modernity/change and tradition/ immobility, which, she says, are often 'dependent on a division placed between the West and the Rest' (1992: 44). Despite its inclusion into the global art circuit, in Kasfir's view African art remains perceived and discussed within these dichotomies, with works made outside of 'traditional' or historical contexts often differentiated by the term 'contemporary African art' (1992: 44). As this remains on the side of modernity and the West, the notion of contemporaneity in African art continues to be a contentious topic in art history. While the complexities of the relationship between the West and the generic category African art are established and debated largely within a Western critical context, the struggle for curators of African art is now between two positions: on the

one hand, the persistent racist attitudes towards art from the continent (largely but not exclusively from the West) that exclude it from modernity; and on the other hand, an African view (which is not necessarily shared by all Africans) that wants to claim an African space within the contemporary.

This debate has been discussed by curators Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, who, in their discussion of the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition (1999), point out its flaws and successes in framing the idea of the contemporary. They propose not only that, despite the controversy, the exhibition was indeed a global project in 'its ability to create dialogue between artists of various cultures' (Enwezor & Oguibe 1999: 9), but also that revisiting it allows them to 'sketch the development of a new critical language and method for the evaluation of contemporary African art' (1999: 9). By inviting a range of views and perspectives, they propose a critical inquiry aimed at interrogating what constitutes contemporary African art, particularly since the inception of *Magiciens de la Terre*. *Magiciens de la Terre*, it seems, has become a model in exhibition studies, invoked as part of

> the ascendance at the time of a postmodernism whose discourses sought to challenge the exclusive set of values that modernism had constructed for itself against any kind of aesthetic contamination. (Enwezor & Oguibe 1999: 9)

It also sought to challenge a (Western) value system not only through what they call 'reification of difference' but also by invoking the postmodernist argument through its choice of non-Western artists (Enwezor & Oguibe 1999: 9), a postmodernist argument that advocated multiplicity as opposed to the universalist ideals of modernism. The exhibition therefore signified a 'radical global shift politically' (1999: 10), a shift that these curators note is marked as an important component of the means through which African artists entered and became renowned within the continent and the diaspora (1999: 10). Their anthology is thus centred on contributions that 'investigate the critical and theoretical frameworks that have had implications for the construction, evaluation, and reception of contemporary African art' (1999: 11).

But the views they expressed also offer departure points to further discuss and debate these concepts. It is through these inquiries that I attempt to outline the somewhat precarious positioning of the 'rural' artists in the South African context.

As argued by Salah Hassan, the disparities between the way African art has been written about and what it is in reality are largely due to the fact that 'it remains a

Western discipline, understood through Western sensibilities, expression and responses to African visual culture' (Hassan 1999: 215). Part of the problem, Hassan explains, is that what the Western account has done in African art, is sow a division between southern and North Africa, with certain parts of Africa being left out of the discourse of traditional African art history. Furthermore, he elaborates, certain art forms like sculpture have often been privileged as a subject of interest at the expense and exclusion of other forms (Hassan 1999: 215). This, he says, has resulted in an

> ethnographic approach, one that has narrowly focused on the description and function of the objects rather than a concerted effort to engage with other elements such as style and cultural social context. (1999: 215)

Borrowing a phrase from Kasfir, Hassan describes the written text on contemporary African art as 'presented in the mode of the "ethnographic present", a sensibility that suggests that African art is only ever produced communally as opposed to being credited to individual creativity' (1999: 216). The result, he notes, is that

> the contemporary experience of African art has been grossly neglected by many scholars who have favoured more 'traditional' and so called 'classical' African art forms, creating a situation where exhibitions of contemporary African art are 'intermittent and sparse', usually with very poor or no documentation at all. (1999: 216)

Hassan's argument places emphasis on the neglect of contemporary African art within the scholarly fields of inquiry, but he is also concerned with how often this art is seen as inauthentic or lacking authenticity because of its resemblance to Western art (1999: 216). He notes that African art is often accepted as authentic under the 'guise of cultural difference' (1999: 216), where there is an implied misconception that it was the West that raised the status and images of African art to a point of sophistication. What this view discounts essentially is the fact that 'African assimilation of western techniques, materials, ideas and forms has been creative, selective, meaningful and highly original' (1999: 217).

Kasfir makes her argument based on the question of authenticity in relation to African art and discusses the ways in which this issue was dealt with in two major

exhibitions: '*Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*[16] held at the Museum of Modern Art from September 1984–January 1985, and *Magiciens de la Terre*. Both are frequently cited as controversial when it comes to the curatorial and contextual sensibilities they employed in presenting traditional and contemporary African art in relation to Western art, and both can be described as defining moments in discussions around what constitutes 'contemporary' in African art. However, the 'affinity'[17] approach they adopted, although intended to emphasise similarities, in effect not only accentuated difference, but also, in so doing, sought to legitimise the authentication of African art forms in terms of the evolution of the Western modernist canon.

Kasfir's argument about authenticity is significant because it poses the larger question of who authenticates African art and on what basis. She foregrounds this question in discussing the relationship between authenticating and collecting, and states: 'in the African context there is an "internal contradiction" with collecting in that it claims to exclude "contamination" while simultaneously requiring it in the form of the collector' (Kasfir 1992: 42).

The assumption that collecting is devoid of any political or economic motive, she argues, has resulted in some erroneous perceptions, particularly in African art, where what is thought of as art is often dictated by Western taste as opposed to Western contamination (Kasfir 1992: 42). This has in turn affected how meanings for African art objects are created, but has also raised concern over who, or what, determines cultural authenticity (1992: 41–42).

*Tributaries* was intended to provide a view of South African contemporary art to a non-South African audience and to portray this, the curator explains, he decided to ignore the expected critiques and compile a show that would avoid the notion of an 'authentic' South African art and rather act as 'an illustration of the complexity and richness of a diverse society unusually brought together through a variety of artworks' (Burnett 1985: 1). The problem with this approach is that it did not consider any of

[16] *'Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* was curated by William Rubin, director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture in collaboration with Professor Kirk Varnedoe of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Philip Morris Incorporated sponsored the exhibition with additional sponsorship from the National Endowment for the Arts (The Museum of Modern Art 1984: 1).

[17] Kasfir uses the term to describe the relationships between the 'tribal and the modern', the Third World and First World, which were set up by these exhibitions (Kasfir 1992: 42).

the socioeconomic issues affecting the cultural landscape in South Africa, and focused rather on presenting a decontextualised view of contemporary South African art. Implicit in this approach was an attempt to establish a particular idea of what should be deemed contemporary and 'authentic' art. The curator of *Tributaries* may not have explicitly asserted the idea that all the pieces on the exhibition were equal as 'art' works, but his selection of the specific artists and artworks indicates that he was attempting to create a particular relationship between them by displaying them in a single exhibition space and mode. This relationship, as pointed out by Andrew Verster, was for Burnett

> a question of not looking at ourselves in relation to a few geniuses, ones from across the seas, but seeing ourselves in relation to each other, finding a sense of common humanity. (Verster 1985: 98)

Verster notes that while Burnett was unsure of what he was looking for in composing the exhibition, 'instinct told him that the Authorised Version of our art, that "art is white and art is urban," was faulty' (1985: 99). The dissatisfaction that Burnett felt, according to Verster, had to do with the 'inflexible distinction between art and ethnology' (1985: 99), the consequences of which he describes as a 'misplaced exclusivity' and 'colonial anachronism' that has not only limited the availability of resources but also resulted in an unimaginative art world (1985: 99). *Tributaries,* for Verster, 'marks the moment when a colonial era is finally put to rest and another one begins … in fact it is for someone to begin again from the start' (1985: 99).

While Verster's article is suggestive, it nonetheless brings attention to the provocative dialogues the *Tributaries* exhibition stimulated through the relationships formed between the works, with their differing stylistic characteristics and sensibilities. Sensibilities, according to Verster, 'are not always blunted by the brainwashing of books and learning or success' (1985: 99), and the artists Burnett included exhibited this through their unique visions. This could explain why artists like Jackson Hlungwani and Noria Mabasa, for instance, enjoyed a more favourable reception than other 'rural' artists that exhibited alongside them in subsequent exhibitions devoted exclusively to the work of 'rural' artists, such as Johannes Maswanganyi and Nelson Mukhuba.

It is therefore not unreasonable to suggest that an exhibition like '*Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* might have prompted the

framework of a show like *Tributaries*, given the period[18] when the exhibitions were held and the impact *Primitivism* had in art-historical discourse concerning the place of African art in modernism and the underlying commonalities they shared. In the first instance the historical appropriation of 'tribal' arts by modernist painters and sculptors had long been established among European modernists, such as Pablo Picasso with the cubist approach, but also because both occurred at a time when the rudiments of modernism's response to these objects were being re-examined through postmodernist thinking. More notable, argued the curator William Rubin, is how affinities, as argued in the '*Primitivism'* exhibition, 'presented a group of tribal objects with an appeal to modern taste and contemporary explorations that drew inspiration from the methods, materials and mentality of Primitive cultures' (Rubin 1984: 2).

Rubin's statement is not only indicative of the problematic approach the exhibition took in framing the cultural material of non-Western cultures, but also how this served to appeal to a particular taste. In the *Tributaries* exhibition, the paradigm of affinity was, according to Sabine Marschall (2001: 53), employed as a curatorial strategy of accommodating black artists, which she states was achieved through 'the objective of demonstrating similarity instead of difference' (2001: 53). Marschall notes that although these paradigms have changed over the years, the historical legacy of South Africa is such that works by many self-taught black artists were for a long time differentiated from works by academically trained and internationally connected whites (2001: 51). This, she argues, can be attributed to the nature of art criticism and scholarship in South Africa, which, she observes, has for the most part 'followed a western model characterised by formalist perspectives, with a rigid adherence to the hierarchical division between the categories of fine art[19] and craft' (2001: 51).

The division she describes was thus set along racial lines that ultimately led to the works of black artists being exhibited, researched, and documented and discussed a particular way (Marschall 2001: 51). Furthermore, she notes, it created a perception that 'there were no works of "art" by black artists' (2001: 51), a view entrenched in the framing of books like Esme Berman's *The Story of South African Painting*

[18] *'Primitivism' in 20th Century art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* opened at the Museum of Modern Art on 27 September 1984, and a few months later *Tributaries* opened, on 26 February 1985.

[19] See glossary in page 189

published in 1975. Marschall points out that *Tributaries* included objects that were not ascribed to an author and therefore conveyed a sense of 'pluralism', which she argues became 'increasingly favoured over affinity as a strategy of accommodating black artists into an inclusive South African canon' (2001: 55).

The pluralistic approach was especially emphasised by the curator of the *Tributaries* exhibition, both as a means to create a sense of sameness and an attempt to narrow the boundaries between 'white art' and 'black craft'. Marschall notes how this was stimulated by

> the rising influence of postmodernist theoretical discourses, in particular the questioning of hierarchically ordered binaries, the increasing interest in marginal cultures as a result of the critique of dominant Western culture, and the blurring of boundaries between 'high' and 'low' art. (2001: 52)

The idea of pluralism also had political significance for the large-scale exhibitions in this discussion, where, Marschall notes,

> it reflected the reinstallation of the permanent collections of public galleries, which as state institutions, were now eager to acknowledge their responsibility towards a more broadly conceived South African public. (2001: 55)

Marschall also notes that it was the pluralistic approach that guided the First Johannesburg Biennale and therefore 'it presented a redefined canon of South African art in a South African context' (2001: 55). During this period, there appeared to be few writers addressing the challenges black artists faced with engaging and participating in the contemporary art market. Among art historians and writers, with some exceptions such as Ivor Powell, there appeared to be a reductionist approach towards issues of representation, race and class, as well as aesthetics and taste, all of which were implicit in what became acceptable as 'art' in the local art market. Perhaps one of the most vocal in his criticism of this approach, Powell observes how, in addition to the pressure to measure up to 'international standards', artists (in this case white) in South Africa adopted 'a despondently oedipal relationship to the international art market' (Powell 1985: 45). Powell's review of *Tributaries* examines the notion of 'real art' in relation to the kind of art that traditional art history, and more specifically art criticism of the later twentieth century, studies and critiques. Essentially, what Powell argued is that although

> art can have a life of its own and be experienced as a kind of content in the context of a major art centre, in a local situation no such identification is possible due to the burden carried by a western standardisation of art. (1985: 45)

The question of what constitutes art and its authentication should thus be preceded by an examination of the criteria used to define art. However, this definition, Anitra Nettleton explains, remains dubious as it subscribes to the notion of unique creation, which is primarily a Western definition of art and the art object (Nettleton & Hammond-Tooke 1989: 8–9). Nettleton supports her argument by pointing to the fact that objects in the African art field are often prioritised due to their association to Western notions of art — that is, freestanding figures, relief carvings and applied art. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings, she suggests, display an ambivalent attitude towards art from Africa: on the one hand they describe its exotic appeal, while on other they reveal a romanticised and surprised admiration for the craftsmanship achieved by African artists (Nettleton & Hammond-Tooke 1989: 8–9). Nettleton's argument raises questions of authenticity in relation to distinctions between South African art and art from other parts of Africa, which in numerous cases has received wider scholarly interest as it is perceived as more authentic. This, she observes, is as a result of a limited amount of written history on black art in South Africa, which in turn sustains myths that suggest that South African black peoples were/are art-less and thus less civilised than other black groups in Africa. While this was, as she argues, a previous prevailing perception, it also highlighted 'the perennial problem as to what constitutes "art", especially as it contrasts with "crafts"' (Nettleton & Hammond-Tooke 1989: 8).

## 2.2 Exhibitions as art history

The debate around what constitutes 'contemporaneity' in African art is implicit in the discussion of the 'rural' artists precisely because it is the meanings associated with this that resulted in the problematic inclusion of these artists in these exhibitions. One way to argue this is to draw from the example of the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition and the kinds of questions it raised. These include questions of 'authenticity' and 'canonisation', both of which were implicitly employed in legitimising these meanings as part of the history of African art. For the purpose of this study I will give a brief overview of the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, but I focus on recent

projects revisiting the exhibition as they offer more nuanced views of its impact on notions of contemporaneity in African art. This is not to suggest that *Magiciens de la Terre* does not continue to feature in the debates and discussions in contemporary art contexts in a pervasive manner. In the past year *Magiciens de la Terre* has been revisited through two considerable projects. The first is *Magiciens de la Terre: Reconsidered* held in London from 11–13 April 2014. The second project is *Magiciens de la Terre: Retour sur une exposition légendaire* held from 2 July–8 September 2014, again at the Centre Georges Pompidou, where the original exhibition had been mounted. Both projects produced new and regurgitated material from the first exhibition in a manner that, as proposed by Lucy Steeds, would require that we explore the exhibition as a moment of 'ruptures and discontinuities'.[20] In order to adopt this stance, I argue, it is necessary to consider that as an important exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre* has not only played a role in bringing the work of African artists (and other non-Western artists) to the attention of the contemporary world, but also that the ways in which it did this can be challenged through approaches that look beyond its perceived Western framework.

Described by its curator Jean-Hubert Martin in an interview as 'the first exhibition to take a global overview' (Musée nationale d'art moderne 1989: 1), *Magiciens de la Terre* has by and large been discussed as representing a set of dichotomies (centre versus periphery, Western versus non-Western, and modern versus traditional), rather than as a moment marked by an upsurge of questions. Steeds points out that the relevance of some of these questions was itself questioned, and also, more importantly, asks 'if those [questions] begged by its premises had been adequately answered' (Steeds 2013: 24). In an attempt to address some of these questions the Tate Modern's film unit recently convened a project that would revisit the exhibition titled *Magiciens de la Terre: Reconsidered* (11–13 April 2014). It resulted in a culmination of various partnerships that produced the publication of *Making Art Global (Part 2): 'Magiciens de la terre' 1989* (Steeds 2013). An anthology of essays, interviews and statements by academics, the curators and some artists, the publication fits appropriately into a body of work that Aruna D'Souza describes as 'critiques of the effects of post-colonial theory in the last ten years'

[20] The idea of 'ruptures and discontinuities' was discussed earlier in another context, see page 19-20 of this chapter (Steeds 2013: 24).

(D'Souza 2013: viii). This, she explains, is as much about reviewing the Eurocentric properties of art history as it is about the

> urgency of art historians and art history departments in the west wanting to 'deal with' the reality that the twenty-first century world seems much bigger than the one the discipline had imagined for itself since its formation in European universities. (2013: viii)

The second project revisiting the exhibition is perhaps more explicit than the former in terms of the institutional framework it operated under. *Magiciens de la Terre: Retour sur une exposition légendaire* (March–September 2014) is significant because it was held at the Centre Georges Pompidou, site of the original installation. This was a revisiting of the exhibition that I argue served to reinstate and legitimate the prominence of the Western institution as a forerunner in debates related to non-Western art. Saskia Sassen, who was also one of the artists featured in the initial exhibition held in 1989, curated the reprise exhibition in a manner that resembled a travel diary. Instead of the actual artworks, large-size postcard images of the works were displayed randomly, albeit loosely based on the themes introduced by the first exhibition. These include 'Healing Rituals', 'Domestic and Religious Rites', 'The World of Calligraphy', 'Cosmogony, Rites and Ritual', and finally, 'Primitive Forces and the Contemporary World'. It is not necessary to expand on these themes as they require a detailed reference to the initial exhibition, but I argue that they are relevant to my study because they are clearly related to the necessary discussion of the use of classification and classificatory systems within the (Western) art world.

Revisiting the exhibition has also highlighted moments in history where the concept of the exhibition re-emerges in discussion about other exhibitions. This re-evaluation of the exhibition model, as seen with the *Exhibition Histories* project (of which the *Making Art Global (Part 2): 'Magiciens de la terre' 1989* publication is a component), has followed a contextual framework that has formed links with the research first introduced by exhibitions and catalogues like *Exhibition–ism: museums and African art* (Nooter Roberts *et al.* 1994) and *Exhibiting cultures: the poetics and politics of museum display* (Karp & Lavine 1991). Both these publications are located within a particular historical epoch when certain exhibitions were being scrutinised for the kinds of issues they raised around representations of 'others', and also in terms of the way the material culture of the 'other' was canonised through art history. The

two publications also overtly discuss exhibitions and the kinds of questions they raise around subjectivity and modes of communication. At the centre of their discussions is the fact the although exhibitions offer the possibility to challenge methodological or historical narratives, they are equally important as contemporary texts that provide a broader understanding of the social, political and economic forces that shape artistic production and its distribution at any given period. Exhibitions are thus, according to this view, 'naturally subjective and the ultimate product of a series of choices made by a particular group of people, at a particular time and place'.[21]

*Exhibition–ism* highlights the politicised topography of 'exhibition culture' whereas *Exhibiting cultures* tends to look more closely at ways of 'exhibiting culture'. Both, however, look at the practice of exhibiting through the frame of the museum and the exhibition as a living entity that informs one's experience and understanding of the world. Cameron (1971) argues that this inquiry into the purpose of museums and exhibitions emerged as the role of museums began shifting from the traditional temple-like stature to the more accepted notion of forums for critical engagement from the late 20th century. However, as observed in *Exhibiting cultures*, some of these engagements remained fixated in a 'universalist aesthetic', making such spaces challenging for collecting and exhibiting 'other' cultures. In addition, to evoke the politics of representation within art institutions, Karp and Lavine's discussion is significant because they make us aware of the debates around the mutable and often complex implications of exhibiting such work within the (Western) museum in a contemporary context (1991: 3–4).

*Exhibition–ism* and *Exhibiting cultures* obviously came much earlier than the projects revisiting *Magiciens de la Terre*, but in contrast the latter appear to be more accommodating of debates on the exhibition as a global turn indicative of what D'Souza articulates as 'the pressures on art history to open itself up to the effects of its current position within a newly mapped world' (2013: vii). The effects of this were in a sense signalled by Araeen's argument, which, in his main criticism of the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition, foregrounded a conceptual weakness of the exhibition that he describes as a 'lack of any radical theoretical or conceptual

[21] Here the concept of an exhibition is more tightly defined as a process of conceiving and construction that conveys meaning and a message through art, but also, and more importantly, is culturally determined by the nature of exhibiting as a mode of communication (Nooter Roberts *et al.* 1994: 8–24).

framework that could justify bringing together works that represented different historical formations' (2013: 241).

The same critique, I argue, can be applied to exhibitions held in the South African context, where the contextual framework of exhibitions such as *Tributaries* stirred debates around the inclusion and exclusion of who participates in a 'national' art-historical narrative. The mid-1980s to the mid-1990s was a politically and socially tense decade in the history of South Africa, signalling the collapse of the apartheid regime: a countrywide state of emergency was declared in 1986, but this failed to stem the tide. This was a challenging time for black activists and white liberals, with both groups including members of the art community. Many of the latter began to mobilise through a variety of cultural-resistance activities as a response to the harsh tactics of the regime. By then the majority of national art institutions had begun to review their acquisition policies and include a substantial amount of work by black artists. However, the question of redress, despite the emphasis afforded to it on numerous platforms such as conferences and publications, presented a set of difficult questions regarding the inclusion of black artists. Because many museums were only starting to grapple with the complexities of transforming policies and traditions entrenched in the fabric of South Africa's cultural landscape, they were ill equipped to deal with the fundamental shift in cultural policy that such acquisitions signalled.

The exhibitions I explore in this study were possibly the most well documented of the large-scale exhibitions staged during this period: they received extensive media coverage, drew a sizable amount of local and international attention, and had large audience attendances. They were also high profile, considering the amount of funding and support they received from both corporate and state entities. In many instances they are described by critics as having challenged the gaps within museums and other institutions, which (with some exceptions) had not until then included substantial acquisitions of art by black artists. It is from this context that the study on large-scale exhibitions has developed, with a particular focus on the written commentaries they generate, so as to determine how exhibitions become the eventual repositories of particular kinds of art-historical narratives, particularly with regard to artists framed outside a Western mode of art production. By looking at the work of black artists considered as 'rural', the aim is to explore how the visibility of such artists at various moments was fostered by their appearance in major exhibitions. The

content and contexts of such exhibitions as social structures have evidently played a determining role in generating critiques that established differentials. These differentials, I argue, were at play in the degree to which certain artists were included and received into the Western canon of South African art history while others remained on the periphery. This thus also served to explain why some artists have remained prominent and others have disappeared from mainstream view.

If I take the suggestion by Steeds to reconsider the idea of an exhibition as 'a moment of unsteady departure or rapturing event' (2013: 24), how then — to borrow from Foucault's mode of questioning — can I begin to review its meaning as part of 'the centralising powers linked to the institution and functioning of organised scientific discourse within a society such as ours' (Foucault cited by Gordon 1980: 83) It is reasonable to infer that 'rural' artists emerged into the mainstream art market from the time they appeared in the *Tributaries* exhibition, but at the same time it is also unreasonable to assume that these artists did not have a life and creative presence somewhere, both before and subsequent to their 'discovery' by mainstream curators of the 1980s and early 1990s. Gavin Younge reminds us that it is important to remember that apart from agencies like Ditike under the Venda Development Corporation (VDC), very few means were available for 'rural' artists to exhibit and sell their work (Younge 1992: 64-65), although there were some collaborations between galleries such as the Everard Read Contemporary, the Helen de Leeuw and the Goodman galleries. But he also makes us aware of the ramifications for a modernising African polity and the desire to develop an area based on tourist attractions, in relation to which Ditike played a significant role.

Ditike was established in 1985 under the Venda Development Corporation (VDC) to provide services to the people of Venda by developing art and crafts. David Rossouw was appointed product advisor in 1986 and due to his Fine Arts background he placed much emphasis on art, particularly sculpture, and facilitated many important exhibitions that included works from this area (Younge 1992: 64). The first of these exhibitions, he points out, was held at the Federated Union of Black Arts in a gallery in Newtown in 1984. Curated by David Koloane, it was the first extensive exhibition of this type of work to be held in a gallery. Later this work was featured in the *Tributaries* exhibition and was perhaps the most important as it toured internationally. There is no real relationship that can be drawn between what Koloane

curated and what Burnett later curated in early 1985, except, perhaps, for the kinds of work each showed, which was not necessarily a question of repetition but rather an expansion. Both exhibitions in some sense sought to expand on the established idea of what South African art had come to constitute. Ditike later exhibited as an entire unit at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 1987. While Gavin Younge's account of this history can be problematised, in mounting the history of Ditike and the VDC in relation to aspects of contemporary transactional processes his account reveals other issues because it 'draw(s) attention to the absent determinants of authorial intention and artistic authenticity' (Younge 1992: 70), furthermore 'accessing the tradition of sculpture and its role, status and social position of its producers, [revealing] the reciprocity of power relationships relative to specific aspects of political history' (Younge 1992: 70).

## 2.3 Conclusion — Biennale

Speaking about *Africus, the First Johannesburg Biennale,* Araeen notes that 'in addition to opening up South Africa to the international art world, the first and second biennales were also meant to serve and address the needs of its local and national constituency' (Araeen 2000).

However, it is his question about 'how these needs could be served if the host community was over-ruled or suppressed on the basis of voices which belong to the past' (Araeen 2000), that I wish to expand in relation to the exhibitions in this study. Araeen's question is of course raised in an opinion piece, one that appears to be more about personal politics than the core issues of the biennales. He does, however, present a convincing argument, particularly with regard to some of the failures of the biennale, that could explain why it has since become the repository of a historical epoch that has shaped the narrative of South African art in a particular way.

It must be noted that the biennale is not the primary focus of this study; rather, it is examined because of its wider historical importance in 'raising questions not only around who gets represented but also how they are represented' (Araeen 2000). African artists' participation in the international arena and biennales was prompted by large-scale exhibitions like *Magiciens de la Terre*, and for Araeen this raised a concern not just about representation, presence and visibility, or the lack thereof, but more importantly about 'the nature of their presence and visibility within the western institutional structure' (Araeen 2000). It is thus significant that, since its staging,

*Magiciens de la Terre* has re-emerged in various ways that not only seek to redefine its place in the global context but also to reinstate its position as a landmark project. It is useful for this study, then, to draw from a consideration of *Magiciens de la Terre* because its structure resonates with what Ricky Burnett had done a few years earlier. The comparison between *Tributaries* and *Magiciens de la Terre* is thus made to draw attention to how certain artists were incorporated into the exhibition system. In both cases the exhibitions appropriated artists who were, prior to the exhibitions, working in a praxis that was completely separate from that of the art world.

The biennales and their framing as large-scale exhibitions are thus a usefully contribution to an understanding of the three case studies because of the way they featured the 'rural' artists.

## CHAPTER TWO: TRIBUTARIES: A VIEW OF CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN ART (1985)

This chapter explores the manner and processes in which a particular group of artists, labelled as 'rural'[22] artists, were featured in a large-scale exhibition in the early 1980s and subsequently entered the mainstream art market. It first explores the fact that these artists were categorised in this particular way in many written accounts, such as newspaper reviews and articles, based on their geographical background, lack of formal training in art and biographical trajectory. I therefore examine the reception and promotion of these artists in the mainstream art market, where over time some became more prominent than others. In her study of these artists, Jane Duncan discusses some important factors that may have contributed to their favourable reception (Duncan 1994). She outlines a range of socioeconomic factors that she states may have influenced this reception, based on how they were marketed and commercialised. However, in this chapter I focus more closely on what happened to these artists in the art market and exhibition circuit from the time when they were first featured in the *Tributaries* exhibition onwards.

The catalogue and archive of *Tributaries* function as a time capsule, one that I argue, signified a period that marked a canonisation of certain African objects and art forms within the domain of a Western-style art-historical narrative. It must be noted first that this was not the first time that African objects and art forms entered the Western art paradigm — historically African art had appeared in many art exhibitions prior to exhibitions like the '*Primitivism'* show, but it was their appearance in other historically significant exhibitions,[23] as well as inside the studios of modernist European and American (male) artists, that made this juxtaposition worth noting. However, unlike the '*Primitivism'* exhibition, *Tributaries* was described in most reviews and articles as a general success, mainly because it took what was seen as an unconventional approach to displaying South African art. However, I argue that this

[22] The term 'rural' is from here on placed in inverted commas to point out its relationship to the use of the term 'primitive' art, which will form part of a theoretical framework that problematises its use within ambiguous ideological spaces.

[23] *'Primitivism' in 20th century art: affinity of the tribal and modern* opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York on 27 September 1985 and is in American and European modernist art history often cited as 'one of the first exhibitions to juxtapose modern and "tribal" objects in the light of informed art history'. It was curated by William Rubin, head of the museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture and director of the landmark 1980 *Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective*, in collaboration with Professor Kirk Varnedoe of New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. (The Museum of Modern Art 1984: 1)

did not necessarily mean that it challenged the prevailing perceptions about art from Africa or South Africa, as is sometimes suggested, but rather that due to its scale, it requires to be 'understood in the broader context of both national and institutional policy and politics' (Coombes 1994: 44)[24]

The basis of these politics is perhaps more clearly outlined by James Clifford's writings on the predicaments of collecting art and culture, where he argues that in addition to being ideological and institutional systems, most museums and their collections are subjective because in essence 'they present cultural description as a form of collecting' (Clifford 1988: 215). This way of collecting, he explains, is best articulated through the work of Susan Stewart — amongst other writers — who brings our attention to a classificatory system of collecting where 'an illusion of a relation between things takes the place of a social relation, and presents this as an adequate representation of a world' (Stewart, cited by Clifford 1988: 220).

The works featured in the *Tributaries* exhibitions were not part of a collection although the exhibition itself followed a similar approach in how it selected and compiled the artists and artworks it featured. It therefore constituted as a collection because of the fact that single curator collected it and it later travelled to a number of cities in Germany as a collection of works that represented a view of contemporary South African art. Indeed in the introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition, the curator explains how 'the idea of assembling a collection of contemporary South African art for a European tour' (Burnett 1985) presented a unique opportunity to give a better understanding of the creative impulse in the country. This illusion is first created through a process of selection that 'removes objects from their original context and then displays them in a museum and exhibition setting and then makes them stand for an abstract whole' (Stewart, cited by Clifford 1988:220).

[24] In a chapter concerning 'Aesthetic Pleasure and Institutional Power', Annie Coombes considers the notion of 'degeneration and other racialised assumptions that play out in categories and descriptive processes for classifying ethnographic collections, and thus their consumption by the museum-going public' (1994: 43). She notes how there remains a lack of acknowledgement of the extent and effectiveness of museums as constituents of an imperial ideology based on the West and the rest, and that it was the establishment of some major ethnographic museums in colonial Britain that led to the rise of anthropological studies, not only as a professional domain but also as an instrument of the colonial project. The Benin Bronze history she cites is an example that not only 'generated debate amongst different communities of interest in Africa but also illustrated a promise of a revisionist history that starts to challenge the complete incredulity that such work could possibly be produced by Africans' (Coombes 1994: 61). I have referred to this example here to also highlight the institutional framework that has for the most part determined the way African art is viewed within Western structures.

Clifford has cited a number of other authors to substantiate his views on why the idea of collecting and acquisition in the modern Western museum should be problematised. For the purpose of this chapter, it is important to highlight this in relation to the question of institutional frameworks where, Clifford notes, it is assumed that 'objectivity is a given, not produced and therefore historical relations of power become occulted' (Clifford 1988: 220). While Clifford looks particularly at the question of what happens to objects once they enter the museum space, in discussing the *Tributaries* exhibition, I wish to emphasise that the manner in which these power relations operated was a cause for concern. Clifford observes how over time 'the making of meaning through classificatory systems and display becomes mystified as adequate representation' (1988: 220), particularly in institutional structures like museums where, he says, 'the time and order of the collection erase the concrete social labour of its making' (1988: 220).

The fact that *Tributaries* was not held in a museum but rather that it had a space constructed specifically for it within an old market building, for the use of which Burnett had to obtain permission from the Johannesburg City Council, does not affect my argument. Rather it suggests that in reconstructing a space, Burnett was not only challenging the conventions of exhibiting spaces but also what goes into these spaces. This follows Clifford, who points to a critical aspect of collecting, which he explains, 'forms a coherent ordering and displaying of objects, that then overrides specific histories of the object's production and appropriation' (1988: 220).

While *Tributaries* was not necessarily about collecting, Clifford's statement resonates because he points to a critical aspect of not only how objects are often grouped together, but also how this grouping begins to construct formations of (cultural) identity. I argue that despite the exhibition curator's claim that he had fostered a neutral space where a diversity of visual artistic expressions could exist, he inevitably employed a classificatory system that first organised and then displayed the objects it collated/curated in a particular way — in Clifford's sense of creating an illusory relation as opposed to a social relation between things. It illustrated a historical and productive process that sought to present a particular view of contemporary South African art at the time. If one considers the idea that whatever the reason for their collection, gathered artefacts function within 'a developing capitalist system of objects' (Baudrillard, cited by Clifford 1988: 220), then it is

possible to consider *Tributaries* as ‘a deployment and circulation of artefacts by virtue of devising a sense of value’ (Clifford 1988: 220). In other words, it lends itself to a classificatory system that in, Clifford’s delineation, requires that

> a form of subjectivity in ascribing value to objects — in anthropology and the history of modern art — be acknowledged while also taking note of a changing set of powerful institutional practices in collecting and the representation of others. (Clifford 1988: 220)

The *Tributaries* exhibition was seen as a shift in the conventions of both institutional practices and commercial art spaces because it was one of the first in a series of ‘revisionist’ exhibitions in South African art. Its significance is that it influenced how art was viewed and displayed from that point onward in the South African landscape, particularly in relation to large-scale exhibitions. Like other exhibitions held in this era, *Tributaries* raised questions around the inclusion in, and exclusion from, a ‘national’ art-historical narrative in what was a changing political landscape. It is therefore important for this study to start by establishing a historical context against which to interrogate the (then unusual) inclusion of the ‘rural’ artists in this exhibition. Their inclusion, I argue, not only enabled the construction of a particular narrative of South African art history, but also signalled the role exhibitions play in shaping perceptions about artists and certain art forms. I suggest that their inclusion was in many ways part of an institutional process of authenticating and appropriating their work into a particular narrative. My assertion is that, following the transition of some of the objects and art forms featured in the exhibition from ‘ethnographic curiosities’ into the ‘Fine Art’ realm — largely through the efforts of the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries — the way the ‘rural’ artists were represented in the *Tributaries* exhibition resulted from this transition, and later affected the manner in which they were incorporated into South African art history.

I substantiate this through a discussion of canon formation and by interrogating what is legitimised as ‘authentic African art’ in contemporary art history. By generating symbolic value for the varied artistic practices it displayed in the form of an exhibition, *Tributaries* established a precedent for the role of exhibitions to be examined through questioning the processes of canonisation and authentication in the art market, which includes art history, art criticism and exhibitions. This is also because the exhibition came at a time when the establishment

of African art studies within art history departments at institutions in South Africa was relatively recent; some of these departments had inherited objects from other fields like anthropology and archaeology. It must also be noted that despite its size and impact, *Tributaries* has no complete archive.[25] A reconstruction of the exhibition therefore relies on resources like the catalogue, newspaper reviews and other academic writing that makes reference to the exhibition. In other words, with the vaunted image of *Tributaries* as a ground-breaking exhibition came its appearance in writings in art reviews, art history and art criticism.

In 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* opened at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Although *Tributaries* came before *Magiciens*, there are many comparisons that can be drawn between the two exhibitions. Like *Tributaries*, *Magiciens de la Terre* has become part of a lineage of exhibitions that, in their effort to present an overview of art of a particular period or genre (in the case of *Magiciens de la Terre*, a global view), attempt to create a sense of sameness by flattening difference, ultimately accentuating the differences in how art is interpreted in different locales. In both cases the aim was to foster a new way of looking at objects by creating a sense of 'pluralism' to allow everything to be viewed with a level of neutrality. But, as noted by Colin Richards, 'pluralism' can be vague in its pursuit for equality (Richards 1987: 72). Nonetheless, it is this foundation of 'pluralism', I suggest, that Burnett was working with in both his curatorial approach and selection process, and that allowed him to display a diversity of objects and artworks from different cultural backgrounds in one exhibition. It created a scenario where the exhibition from then on functioned within a space of the 'free market' — removing it from history and social politics. But, as Araeen observed in the case of *Magiciens de la Terre*,

> the lack of knowledge or a reluctance to recognise, what has actually occurred, historically and epistemologically, has led to the perpetuation of the very same assumptions which the exhibition claims to question. (Araeen 2013: 238)

The difference, however, is that Burnett was not questioning anything, but was rather attempting a unique curatorial exercise, which, he says, was intended to 'challenge [the] parameters of defining and appreciating art in South Africa' (Dell 1989: 45).

[25] 'Archive' is referred to here in the sense of a collection of material on the exhibition gathered from different sources in one place. The majority of personal memorabilia and other important documents were lost, including personal newspaper clippings, reviews, articles, interviews, and a video interview between Ricky Burnett and Ivor Powell when the exhibition opened in 1985.

Nonetheless, there are parallels that can be drawn between the approaches that both these exhibitions' curators employed. Burnett explains that '*Tributaries* looked beyond the pale — outside of the city walls and constructed around the idea of "qualities" as opposed to "quality"' (1997: 5) while Jean-Hubert Martin asserted in relation to *Magiciens* that 'the term quality was eliminated from his vocabulary, since there is no convincing system to establish relative and binding criteria of quality' (Martin, cited by Araeen 2013: 240).

*Tributaries* made a concerted effort to disavow difference in that it presented such political and ideological concerns across the divide operating between two systems: the public institutions and the commercial art market. On the one hand, the market stood to gain or profit from promoting these artists in a particular way, while on the other, the public institutions sought to incorporate them into the historical narrative in a manner that would ensure the establishment of a knowledge base. By functioning in the 'free market', the exhibition presented a different perspective on South African art and also positioned itself as providing a unique and specific 'view of contemporary South African art' to both local and international audiences.

As a result, I argue, *Tributaries* stimulated the reception and visibility of certain artists who until then had not appeared in the mainstream art market. The 'visibility' and 'reception' of the 'rural' artists alludes to a process of canonisation guided by politics and ideological concerns that played out in accounts of art history, art criticism, literature and subsequent exhibitions. Revisiting *Tributaries* requires a broader understanding of the historical and political ideas underpinning the making of exhibitions. Sometimes, as I am suggesting in relation to this exhibition and others, it is the exhibitions themselves that encourage certain ideas for their audiences. In this sense, I suggest that perhaps the visibility and reception of the 'rural' artists served a greater purpose, one that I argue was as much about entering these artists into the mainstream art market as it was about legitimising a particular scholarship of African art studies in art-historical discourse.

## 3.1 A historical background

On 26 February 1985, *Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art* opened in Johannesburg at premises that had been part of an old market owned by the City Council and was later converted to the Africana Museum, now known as

MuseuMAfricA. It was, according to the arts advisor and curator Ricky Burnett, held in a reconstructed space that was installed with suitable lighting, wall space and equipment to accommodate the exhibition.[26] Privately sponsored, this was also one of the largest exhibitions of South African art to be staged at the time in South Africa, with 111 works made by 111 artists from mainly urban but some rural areas, and from a variety of educational, class and religious backgrounds.

Burnett was appointed by BMW to assemble a collection of contemporary South African art, which he saw 'as an opportunity to add energy to the creative forces at work in South Africa and enhance our understanding of these forces' (Burnett 1985: 1). These forces, I suggest, were part of a moment in the mid-1980s when art — including objects previously seen as ethnographic curiosities — made by black artists was taken into account by the mainstream art market of contemporary South African art. Owing to its scale, not only did it draw a sizable audience, but it also received extensive media coverage. It was reviewed and publicised in various publications, including newspapers (Addleson 1985; Arnold 1985; Molzen 1985) and magazines (Tributaries 1985: 7), as well as academic platforms like conferences papers and journal articles (King 1987; Nettleton 1988; Nettleton 2000), and since then has re-emerged in a number of contemporary art texts as a momentous exhibition that shifted the dynamics of South African contemporary art.

*Tributaries* was unique, owing to the fact that, for the first time, black urban and 'rural' artists exhibited their works alongside white urban artists on a public platform. This shift was read in different ways within the existing visual culture landscape. In some instances it was seen to be making a political statement; in others it was seen as an ambitious curatorial project as a form of cultural exchange. However, it also led to audiences reconsidering what is accepted as contemporary South African art, where certain artists and artworks — in particular traditional objects and works by 'rural' artists — became visible by being displayed alongside those of urban artists.

*Tributaries* received sponsorship from BMW South Africa, a German motor manufacturing company that had had a long presence in South Africa since the early 1970s. It already had a regular cultural programme consisting of car exhibitions, jazz festivals and medieval music concerts in Munich and other Bavarian cities, so it was

[26] Ricky Burnett, Interview: 2012

not entirely uncharacteristic for it to support such an initiative (Tributaries 1985: 7). The exhibition was accompanied by a small catalogue with images of the works as well as short biographies of each artist, which could be read in both English and German. According to Burnett, given the nature of the sponsorship it was important for the exhibition to be promoted as an export of contemporary South African art to Europe. It would culminate in a touring show, opening first in Johannesburg, and thereafter travelling to major art centres in Germany, including Munich, Berlin, Stuttgart, Hamburg and Zurich well into 1986 (Tributaries 1985: 7).

The exhibition in Johannesburg was opened to the general public but it was also given a high profile in that it was mandatory that Burnett invite certain dignitaries to the opening, as shown in a short letter addressed to Burnett from the curator of the Africana Museum, Mrs E.B. Nagelgast (Fig. 1). The letter provides him with names of the City of Johannesburg dignitaries to be invited as a courtesy for the free use of the exhibition space.[27] BMW's involvement and sponsorship also contributed to the exhibition's profile. Its stature as an influential motoring company, both locally and internationally, highlights the role of sponsorship and how often this is bound by specific conditions. Although Burnett claims he had a certain level of curatorial authority in terms of the selection process, it does not necessarily mean that there were no conditions stipulated by the sponsorship. These conditions, I suggest, were instrumental in determining the way the exhibition was framed for both local and international audiences. Burnett states that

> the idea of assembling a collection of contemporary South African art for a European tour presented a unique prospect that offered new opportunities and possibilities for South African contemporary art. (Prendini & Underhill 1985: 116)

In an essay written a few years later, Burnett claims that 'the *Tributaries* exhibition refuted simplicity' (1997: 5). Instead of treading the usual path, Burnett was encouraged to take an investigative approach in an attempt to avoid a solely Eurocentric view. However, in taking this direction, I suggest, Burnett reinforced certain ideas about particular art forms, specifically those made by 'rural' artists. To

[27] See Figure 1. Letter to Burnett from the curator of the Africana Museum, Mrs E.B. Nagelgast.

review this I will re-examine the production of the exhibition, its conception and who was involved.

Burnett had the following to say about the genesis of the exhibition:

> *Tributaries* was conceived in a kind of serendipitous manner through a conversation and connection between people who shared similar interests and ideas about art in South Africa at the time.[28]

At the time Burnett was working with Bill Ainslie,[29] who had set up the Johannesburg Art Foundation and with Burnett's assistance identified an opportunity for 'a kind of vocational rather than hobby-driven need for some other kind of art educational facility in the city'.[30] In 1985 Ainslie met with Sir Anthony Caro, a British sculptor who had been invited to South Africa by the Durban Art Gallery to judge a sculpture competition. Upon Caro's arrival in Johannesburg, Ainslie and Burnett took him to the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA), where Caro decided to put together a contemporary art collection that could be used either as an inspirational source for the students, or as fundraising leverage, for which he persuaded major names in international art to donate works.[31] The connections between these key figures are important to note because they are interrelated with the Triangle Arts Trust, which subsequently led to the development of the Thupelo Workshops.[32] It is an important narrative because it highlights the emergence of a relationship that later had an impact on the staging of the *Neglected Tradition* exhibition. Inspired by these activities, Burnett claims his conception of *Tributaries* was spontaneous, 'conjecturally derived' through the 'discovery' of 'rural' artists who were until then unnoticed, given the nature of society at the time, where, as he puts it, 'no one had bothered to look'.[33]

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[28] Ricky Burnett, Interview: 2012.

[29] Bill Ainslie was an influential artist and art teacher during the 1970s and 1980s, especially among black urban art students, many of whom he mentored and trained at the Johannesburg Art Foundation.

[30] The role of art education centres is examined more extensively in later discussion related to the formal training of black artists and how this forms part of the debate around the idea of the 'authentic' African artist.

[31] It was through this meeting, and a conversation between Eberhard V. Kuenheim, then CEO of BMW, Mary Slack of the Oppenheimer Family (who also sat on the board of trustees for FUBA), Sir Anthony Caro, Burnett's ex-wife Sandra and Burnett himself at a dinner one night, that *Tributaries* was conceived almost instantaneously.

[32] The Thupelo Workshops were initiated as a means to offer black artists to work in a form of exchange with established international artists. The workshop played a major role in how work by some of these artists shifted from predominantly figurative work to abstraction. Some of these artists were later featured in *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art*, held in 1989.

[33] Ricky Burnett, Interview: 2012.

## 3.2 The artists

Describing his curatorial approach, Burnett claims that *Tributaries* aimed to bring together artworks and artists that had never been exhibited together before in what he describes as

> a seamless manner that would effortlessly create a magical space where works could relate to one another and create new meanings regardless of the contextual framework or background of the artists that created them.[34]

*Tributaries* was for this reason considered a unique exhibition by its conveners because it shifted the conventions of displaying and viewing art in South Africa by presenting artworks that had never been exhibited together before, and placing these in one large-scale exhibition. It therefore required an open approach that involved embracing a diversity of artistic expressions, albeit through a selection process that ultimately sought to present a view of what could be considered contemporary South African art. Twelve years later, reflecting on aspects of South African art, Burnett recalls that

> *Tributaries* was heralded as marking an irrevocable change in our cultural life, or, as one commentator later put it, 'The most important art event in a hundred years of South African history'. (Burnett 1997: 5)

Not only was Burnett reaffirming the accolades the exhibition had received earlier, but he was also pointing out the impact of the exhibition on the South African art landscape, as well as the international art world — where he reminds us of its relation to other exhibitions like *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris in 1989 and *Africa Explores* in New York in 1991, that he says looked at allied issues (Burnett 1997: 5). What is important to note, however, is Burnett's commendation of the exhibition when he stated that

> only three years after *Tributaries* it was possible for the Johannesburg Art Gallery to become the home of a fine collection of traditional South African material now known as the Brenthurst collection. (1997: 6)

This claim is important to interrogate because prior to the *Tributaries* exhibition, the Wits Arts Galleries in partnership with the Standard Bank had been collecting traditional art forms from the late 1970s onwards to form the Standard Bank

[34] Ricky Burnett, Interview: 2012.

Collection of African Art (formerly the Standard Bank Foundation Collection of African Art), which formed an integral part of the Wits Art Museum collection. Thus the significance of the *Tributaries* exhibition is that it contributed towards (rather than instigated) a shift in the relationship between traditional objects and the institutional structures of museums by firstly, displaying these objects in an unconventional space (unencumbered by the institutional framework of the museum), and secondly, including these objects in an exhibition alongside other kinds of artworks considered to be 'fine' art.

My argument that large-scale exhibitions form part of a 'historical peak'[35] thus stems from reflections and responses to the exhibition which followed its staging. In his reflections Burnett suggests that, despite the serendipitous nature of the exhibition, it also in some ways responded to 'a historically entrenched poverty of the spirit' (1997: 6), which he says ultimately resulted in the positive reception of the show. Although Burnett does not explain what this 'entrenched poverty' could entail, it is probable that he was referring to the conditions produced by the restrictions and the confines of living under the oppressive apartheid state system. The difference in the approach Burnett took is marked, however, by the fact that unlike his collation of objects for *Tributaries*, the collections of the Wits Galleries and the Standard Bank Collection of African Art had institutional backing in research done by academics and scholars on some of the artists and most of the traditional forms that were featured in Burnett's exhibition. The parallels between the two approaches was visible in that they sought to present this work to audiences in a particular way, which ultimately led to the 'rural' artist becoming 'a prime attraction and one of the most enduring legacies' (Burnett 1997: 6) of that period. The entry of artworks by 'rural' artists into major collections presented some challenges for art historians and researchers because it did not really fit into the traditional art mode nor did it explicitly draw from a Western tradition of art making, despite displaying signs of both. I therefore argue that their entry into the South African art-historical narrative had to be legitimised, if not controlled, as a means to articulate and (re)present what should be considered as 'authentic' African art.

The artists featured in the exhibition who were categorised as 'rural and/or transitional' were Jackson Hlungwani, Noria Mabasa, Johannes Maswanganyi,

[35] See Chapter 2, p. 19

Nelson Makhuba, Dr Phatuma Seoka and Paul Tavhana. All of them were based in the Limpopo region[36], an area associated with a widespread carving tradition. Until *Tributaries*, many of these artists had been producing works mainly for use in their immediate community while others were making works directed towards a tourist market. With some exceptions, all of them remained visible well into the early 1990s but subsequently disappeared from view towards the end of that decade. Other objects like the *E'Telephone* (Fig. 2) made by Sara Mahlangu and *Ceremonial Mantle* (Fig. 3) made by Maria Mabhena, were included in *Tributaries* and thus started to complicate the set of categories prescribed by the exhibition because, unlike other similar objects considered to be 'traditional', these works are known by the makers' names.

Burnett claims that in conceptualising the show he steered away from categories, yet in the layout of the catalogue certain categories emerged. The arrangement of the artworks in the catalogue is not in any particular order and the inventory at the front of the catalogue lists the artists and their works in alphabetical order, while the images in the main part are apparently arranged to suggest that Burnett was not adhering to any kind of framework. Yet he deliberately set up some juxtapositions to show similarities between certain artists, while in other instances placed works that were completely unrelated next to each other. This is illustrated by the first page of the catalogue (Fig. 4) where Noria Mabasa's *Portrait of President Mphephu* and Dr Phatuma Seoka's *Head* were placed alongside Bruce Arnott's *Oskar I* and Braam Kruger's *Self-portrait with a pretty frock.* Not only do all four artists come from very different linguistic, social and economic backgrounds, but the sheer incongruity of the juxtaposition is visible in the different modes of expression used by each artist, in spite of the fact that all the works constitute forms of portraiture. In other instances it appears as though the relationship created between artworks was purely aesthetic. This idea is illustrated by the implied similarities between Bruce Arnott's *Oskar I* and Noria Mabasa's *Portrait of President Mphephu*, in both subject matter and formal qualities.[37] Burnett later confirmed the categories he worked with in an interview, stating:

[36] Limpopo was part of the Transvaal province known as Northern Transvaal. It was initially renamed "Northern Transvaal" in 1994, then "Northern Province" in 1995, and then finally "Limpopo" in 2003.

[37] Both works stand as sculptures and the authoritarian figures they portray are supported by Arnott's rationale of his sculpture and its symbolism to power, materialistic age and totalitarianism (Tributaries 1985: 12).

> The real challenge was to create an exhibition that would be both honest and culturally interesting … we considered four broad cultural areas: rural traditional, rural transitional, urban black and urban white. (Burnett, cited in Tributaries 1985: 7–9)

The juxtaposition of the artists in the catalogue layout as well as the categories that were developed, were aimed at enhancing the overall concept of the exhibition as inclusive. While this may not have provided the best compilation for a better understanding of the social and economic backgrounds of these artists, it did however reveal the problematic notion of suggesting that the work these artists produced could be viewed with a sense of sameness on one platform, regardless of imbalances of the artists' living in a segregated society. In this chapter I therefore focus on the first two categories because they evoke exactly the politics in classification, representation and history that the *Tributaries* exhibition claimed to negate. I argue that although these were not necessarily categorically used descriptively in the exhibition, these categories ultimately upheld a division between the different art forms and artists, presenting a contradiction to Burnett's claim that the exhibition was intended to create a sense of integration and harmony amongst a diversity of works. The contradiction was thus between the intention to create an integrated whole and the presence of categories that were the final result. Whether or not this integration was achieved within the exhibition itself is difficult to gauge, as such an assessment would rely on the experience of seeing and walking through the exhibition, amongst other things, but also because there is hardly any installation documentation[38] of the exhibition that could give clues as to how the artworks were displayed in relation to each other in the space. For this reason the catalogue, which is now a remnant of the exhibition, as well as other written material produced around the exhibition, forms an integral part of reconstructing a better understanding of the curatorial approach and selection process that contributed to the narrative of the exhibition.

It is thus important to give some background to the context of the cultural landscape *Tributaries* was part of in order to map why the curatorial thinking around the exhibition was important. This requires a detailed account of who the conveners of

[38] However, I was able to watch a video recording at the UNISA library of an interview with Burnett conducted by Ivor Powell, where they walk through the exhibition. The recording is still in cassette tape format and in the process of being converted into a DVD.

the exhibition were, who the core team in compiling the material for the exhibition was, which artists were included, which works were selected for inclusion, and, more importantly, what the criteria for selection were. Besides Burnett, about whom something has already been said, the making of the exhibition also included senior executives from BMW, art historians and researchers, as well as guides and interpreters, who played a crucial role in facilitating communication between the researchers and the 'rural' artists, many of whom did not speak much or any English. In addition to fostering a (re)consideration of the exhibition as collectively conceived, in that there were other voices besides Burnett who were involved in its making, this account also serves to illuminate the assumptions that came with the categories that were possibly muted yet present in the exhibition.

It is not clear how Burnett arrived at the categories he used to frame the selection of the artists he featured in the exhibition, but in order to analyse them it is necessary to analyse the type of art and artists who were involved in the exhibition. These were divided into four broad categories employed by Burnett and his team. Urban artists were placed in two sub-categories, namely black urban and white urban. The urban category referred to those artists who lived and worked in the urban environment and were therefore producing art within this context.

As Ivor Powell observes, this radicalised aspect of the selection of artists for exhibition showed how 'differently art developed along the racial divide' (Powell 1995: 3), because division ultimately determined the kind of access artists had to the art market. Urban artists (especially white ones) had access to facilities like galleries, exhibitions, and community centres to show and sell their work. However, Powell also observes that during this time 'the implicit definition of art within the basically white art world began to gradually and subtly change' (Powell 1995: 13). He notes that not only were urban black artists accepted into the main art circuit, but also during this time a group of 'rural' wood carvers formerly dismissed as curio makers were 'discovered' and enthusiastically adopted by the art markets of the cities. The difference was that unlike the 'rural' artists, urban-based black artists were mostly trained in community arts centres, although some were self-taught or mentored by a white artist; for example, Sydney and Patrick Hollow (Tributaries 1995: 7) and Lucky Sibiya (1995: 8) were all tutored by Cecil Skotnes. Given that, in 1985, South Africa was still segregated by legislation, black artists did not have much access to higher

learning, let alone to institutions where they could study art, apart from the universities of Fort Hare (from 1974 onwards), Bophuthatswana (1978 onwards), Durban-Westville (1970 onwards) and UNISA (from the 1930s onwards).

Art centres such as Polly Street and Rorke's Drift (among a few others) were therefore instrumental not only in training black artists, but also in 'establishing a visual arts tradition within the black African community' (Koloane 1999: 20). However, this particular form of training, as argued by artist David Koloane, created a 'novel expression that soon developed a submarket within the mainstream South African market in the late 1960s' (1999: 21). Koloane made this remark specifically with reference to the construct of 'township art', which he critiqued as 'a tendency in South African art circles to expect that black artists should not express themselves in a non-representation mode' (Koloane, cited by Richards 1998: 79).

Similarly, Burnett had argued in his introductory remarks for the *Tributaries* catalogue that 'art from the urban black artist has too often been dismissed under the pejorative label of township art and frequently criticized for irrelevance and repetitiveness' (Burnett 1985: iii).

Koloane concurs with Burnett when he notes that in academic writing this term served to propagate and maintain a naïve and crude ethnic identity for black artists. He articulates this racial divide in an account made later about the conditions of black urban artists versus the development of art made by black people in South Africa in relation to the exhibition. Koloane makes reference to Burnett's statement in support of his own observation at the time of *Tributaries*, where he notes that most black artists were

> residing in the segregated settlements officially known as 'townships' and the primary objective was to sell their work not only as a means of subsistence but as a token of success.(Koloane 1999: 21)

So although Burnett's view is accurate in describing the restrictive attitudes towards art made by black artists, it fails to portray the conditions that Koloane, as a participant of the exhibition and an urban artist himself, experienced. To a certain extent, Burnett's statement discounts the practical and economic challenge of art making by black artists because those inequalities revealed themselves in glaring ways in the practicalities of making art, where black artists often opted for more economically viable mediums such linocut, watercolour and pastel drawing, rather

than in the quality or substance of the work itself. There were, however, some exceptions, and although one could argue that Burnett's choice of urban black artists made an attempt to steer away from images that would be seen as typical of 'township' art, his choice ultimately brought attention to the very distinctions he sought to evade.

The selection of works by artists who seemed to be consciously breaking away from a stereotype of art made by black artists, for example Koloane's *Untitled collage* (Fig. 5) and Sydney Kumalo's *Matriarch* (Fig. 6), were very different from the traditional pieces and the works by the 'rural' artists. Koloane's work is a collage of paper images taken from different sources and paint that shows two figures hovering over an aerial view of a combination of urban and rural landscapes. Its appearance resembles the work of Romare Bearden,[39] although the imagery is very specific to a South African context. It illustrates that in addition to drawing from many sources, a range of different expressive modes also influenced the artist. Kumalo's works on the other hand had strong connections to modernist sculpture, and were demonstrably created and appreciated as sculptural artworks. Although its political content is perhaps not as explicit as that of Koloane's work, Kumalo's sculpture retains an African referent in its subject matter and form, coupled with the influence of his mentor Eduardo Villa. Kumalo began studying art in the early 1950s, and received training at Polly Street Art Centre. In fact, many of the black urban artists included in the *Tributaries* exhibition were trained at centres such as Polly Street, Rorke's Drift in KwaZulu-Natal, Mofolo Art Centre in Soweto and Katlehong Art Centre in the east of Johannesburg.

However, artworks such as Tito Zungu's *Large ship and plane* (Fig. 7) and Titus Moteyane's *Concorde* (Fig. 8) disrupt our delimitation of the category of black urban artists in that their work does not fit comfortably with the characteristics prescribed in the distinction between urban, 'trained' and 'rural', 'untrained' artists. While neither artist received any formal art training, their subject matter as well as their techniques created a complex relationship between their work and the way it interacted with and moved between the urban and rural spaces. It should be noted that the category of urban black artists was also entirely populated by male artists, which

[39] Romare Bearden was an African-American artist who worked in several media but was well known for his collage scenes documenting African-American communities in New York City in the early 1960s.

was probably a result of the impact of migrant labour on black South African women's mobility and access to resources.

By contrast, white urban artists included both men and women and, according to their biographies, both groups are recorded as having had an equal degree of access to tertiary education and the broader art market. This, Koloane suggests, was perhaps the most glaring difference between these two categories (black urban and white urban) although they functioned within the same art market. The disparities between black urban artists and white urban artists are revealed in the biographies of the artists, where the majority of white artists included in *Tributaries* had a degree in art, with some teaching art at tertiary institutions that gave tuition in so-called Fine Arts. This imbalance between black urban and white urban artists was, according to Burnett, further deepened by the fact that

> many white artists in South Africa were not only sophisticated in their skills and ambitions but were also well informed about the drift of art developments in other parts of the world. (1985: 2)

However, despite an awareness of these disparities, Burnett insisted on a model that would negate these inequalities, focusing instead, as suggested by the catalogue, on inclusion based on similarities in approaches or aesthetics, as seen when Bhekisisa Mtimkulu's *Cyclone Demoina* (Fig. 9) is presented alongside Nina Romm's *Revamping History* (Fig. 10) and Jo Smail's *Riding a bull before stroking fishes II – 1984* (Fig. 11). Spread out across two pages (Fig. 12), Burnett creates a link between the work based on the gestures, content and format used by the artists. All three works appear to be experimental and very personal, although informed by different experiences. According to Burnett, Mtimkulu appears to have been expressing the trauma he suffered during a cyclone, while Romm and Smail appear to have been experimenting with material and ideas that question a sense of self through art and expression (Tributaries 1985: 6, 43). It seems the question raised by Araeen, 'is it possible for an equal exchange to take place within a framework which does not challenge the unequal relationship between art made from differing locales?' (1989: 239), was not a concern for the exhibition's curators. That a trajectory for Bhekisisa Mtimkulu's work prior to and even after the exhibition is not easily traceable, whereas the movements of the other two artists' works can be accounted for, speaks to the different importance attached to the work of the two white artists and how in the

grander scheme of things, black artists were deprived of the means to develop their work. Andrew Verster elaborates on this, noting that if someone like Mrs Maria Mabhena, who created the *Ceremonial Mantle* (Fig. 3), were given additional resources in the form of some training in design, access to other materials, travel opportunities and a chance to work with other artists, 'the next cloak she made would be different, as original as the old, but new' (Verster 1985 99).

In most instances white urban artist were informed by Western practices in that their praxis formed part of a Eurocentric tradition of art making, such as oil painting and bronze cast sculpture, but seldom wood. There were, however, exceptions among white urban artists' works, such as Peter Schutz's *Memory Chair* (Fig. 13), Willem Boshoff's *Verskeur* (Fig.14) and Andries Botha's *Horing Toring* (Fig. 15), whose work deliberately challenged the conventions of the established Western paradigm in which wood was a medium associated with traditional art. In the context of this exhibition, however, the medium of wood was mainly found in works in the 'rural transitional' category. These artists were later referred to as 'transitional', a term that was found to be problematic and was rejected, because of the way it was used by the white-dominated market. Elizabeth Dell explains that the term was coined to describe 'forms of art transitional between traditional or tribal and the modern art forms found in current African societies' (1989: 45). According to Anitra Nettleton,

> in defining the category 'transitional art' for the University Galleries, we attempted to isolate those objects which had some basis in historical forms and techniques such as clay and wooden figure sculpture, but which were produced for sale in markets other than the traditional local ones. (Nettleton, cited by Dell 1989: 46)

There are various reasons why this term is significant, in that it was coined for very particular circumstances of collecting, where art historians were faced with the dilemma of accessioning work that they felt was important to include but did not necessarily fit the prescribed criteria of 'traditional' art. The reason it was later found to be problematic is that it not only imposed a label on the artists but in so doing devised a formula that in the end limited interpretations and other ways of thinking about particular art forms. Its rejection also had to do with Nettleton's observation that ' in a sense the elevation of such forms from 'primitive curios' to 'high art' is as a result of the rejection of the notion of superiority inherent in colonialism itself' (Nettleton 1988: 301).

This does not, however, mean that the societies who created these art forms were seen as any less inferior by the West, but rather it can be argued that this elevation was treated with condescension in that, as pointed out earlier,[40] people who use the term 'transitional art' place themselves in a position to decide which groups are cultured and therefore civilised.

The works classified as 'transitional' included Nelson Mukhuba's *Dancing Couple* (Fig. 16), Johannes Maswanganyi's *Two Nyamisoro* (Fig. 17) and Noria Mabasa's *Portrait of President Mphephu* (Fig. 18). The coining of such a term also implied that the Wits Art Galleries and the Standard Bank Art Foundation could prescribe the standards of what is considered 'traditional' and is as a result seen as 'authentic' African art. It was a means of accessioning these works as they entered the collection and because they differed from the traditional objects, they required a different set of criteria to legitimate their inclusion into the collection and therefore into an art-historical account.[41] The discussion of the 'rural transitional' artists thus runs concurrently with an examination of the simultaneous inclusion of traditional objects into South African art collections. These are discussed more fully in the conclusion because they summarise the curatorial framework employed by the exhibition through its inclusion of a variety of art forms.

I will now consider the oeuvres and biographies of two 'rural' artists to illustrate how their careers were affected and in some ways shaped by their inclusion in the *Tributaries* exhibition. This process helps in the exploration of assumptions made in the texts produced by the large-scale exhibitions in relation to the biographies of artists, and also raises some critical questions around concepts of modernity and the contemporary in relation to the art produced by these artists. It also allows a better sense of the individual practices of the artists and thus enables an exploration and narration of the alternative circuits, repertoires and publics the artists negotiated at various junctures of their careers outside the exhibition circuit and the art market.

### 3.2.1 Johannes Maswanganyi (b.1948–)

[40] See Hassan's commentary in Chapter 2, p 22.

[41] Nettleton, 2014, personal communication.

Johannes Maswanganyi is the younger of the two artists I discuss in this section: this generation gap was often not clearly delineated in the historical representation of the 'rural' artists. The assumption was that these artists came from the same region and were therefore concerned with the same content and subject matter. The story of how Maswanganyi first started making work is thus paradigmatic of the way these artists' biographies were narrated, in both the catalogue of the *Tributaries* exhibition and the further written commentary on how their work was featured in the exhibition.

According to his biography in the *Tributaries* catalogue, Maswanganyi 'is a Shangaan who learned to carve from his father who made functional objects like spoons, dishes and Jsuri for crushing maize' (Tributaries 1985: 5). There are two things to point out regarding this statement. The first is the mention of his ethnicity, which was emphasised in biographical information of the traditional objects and the 'rural' artist biographies more often than for the urban white or urban black artists. The second is the account of where he draws his inspiration for his art making: this became a pattern for narrating the biographies of these artists as well as for interpretations of their works. Maswanganyi's artist's statement published on the KwaZulu-Natal Society of Arts (KZNSA) website reads as follows:

> I am Tsonga/Shangaan artist born on 17 August 1949 in Giyani (former Gazankulu Homeland) I presently live at Noblehoek Village under Chief Msengi Traditional Authority in the Great Giyani Municipality in Limpopo Province.
>
> This gift of carving came to me in a sleep in the form of a vision. In 1965 the African community was thankful for the products of my work. I helped the community with carved wooden cooking spoons mainly to cook porridge, bowls and musical instruments. In the same year I began making wooden nyamisoros, mortars, yokes, medicine wooden bottles (nhunguvani), and pictures of animals and images of people. It also became easy for me to make historical images. (Maswanganyi n.d.)

It is likely that Maswanganyi did not write his biography himself and, although this version suggests that he self-identifies in a particular way by positioning himself as Tsonga/Shangaan, the identity politics of doing so should be viewed independently of the way he was framed by the *Tributaries* exhibition. The exhibition for instance did not need to account for when, where and why certain artists it featured self-identified in a particular way as this was not central to the main objectives of what it sought to achieve. The notion of an ethnic identification was however applied in the case of

traditional objects featured in the exhibition which invoked larger questions of how certain 'art' works are positioned and categorised.

Maswanganyi, like the other artists to be discussed in this chapter, had no formal training in 'art': he was part of a group of 'rural' artists who were introduced to the art market through their appearance in the *Tributaries* exhibition, which was the first major exhibition to feature works made as functional objects, like the two *nyamisoro* figures (seated figures of traditional healers) (Fig. 17). The figures have removable heads and are carved with hollow bodies for the storage of medicines. Maswanganyi initially made these on commission for traditional healers working in the urban townships, and although they are rooted in the rituals and traditions of Tsonga and Shangaan culture, they also present an ambiguity in how he draws from differing belief systems — Christianity, and traditional Tsonga and Shangaan religion. On the one hand he was producing these objects for traditional healers as part of serving his community, but on the other he saw himself as removed from the same community by virtue of his Christian belief. But, as revealed in a review by Andile Xaba, Maswanganyi may have been aware of the ambiguities in his work, precisely because he makes a clear distinction between his art and primarily commercial ventures, and he therefore saw no contradiction in the two approaches (Xaba 2000). Perhaps this is where the nexus between Maswanganyi's practice (and other 'rural' artists) and the art market lies — that in many ways it points to the limitations imposed by the many labels attached to the work, be they 'rural' or 'transitional' or traditional', so much so that there are significant aspects of the work that are often overlooked.

One such aspect is in the relationship between the subject matter and the patrons for whom he creates the work. As observed by Xaba, although not all of Maswanganyi's *nyamisoro* sculptures were made to visually represent their owners, they may have been assigned to capture a person's spirit (Xaba 2000). Maswanganyi recalls how one day a woman saw one of his figures at a relative's home and asked him if he could make one for her, so he asked her for a photograph of herself to make the sculpture look like her (Maswanganyi, cited by Xaba 2000). This was perhaps Maswanganyi's move into producing larger figures of urban subject matter, which, as observed by Anitra Nettleton, was the type of work that later made its way into an exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in their 'Transitional' room. But it also signifies a

moment where, Nettleton argues, Maswanganyi's work began to tread the line between Fine Art and craft, increasingly depending on what he was depicting. As his work began to appeal to a different audience — a largely white audience — certain types of imagery became more popular than others. The work with more contemporary/modern imagery by Maswanganyi was later incorporated in a variety of exhibitions with a more canonical display of 'high' art such as the Vita Art Now awards and his solo exhibition at the Market Theatre in 1987 (Nettleton 2000: 35).

There are also other factors that may have contributed to this, one of them being the establishment of Ditike[42], an art and craft centre that was managed by the Venda Development Corporation (VDC). The VDC was a development agency whose role was to market and promote the arts and culture of the region. It played a significant role in facilitating an exchange between producers of art and craft and the largely tourist audience that was developing in the area at the time. However, despite the significant role it played in furthering the careers of some of the artists it represented, Younge took a critical view of the entity, characterising it as not just a tool for defining and exploiting ethnic identity as a commodity but equally as an accomplice in maintaining the South African colonial enterprise (Younge 1992).

Another writer who shared a similar sentiment to Nettleton's on the relationship between black art and white markets in South Africa was Ivor Powell, whose writing expressed the same concerns with the way in which black people's material culture in South Africa was instantly commercialised and marketed. His main concern was that not only was this shaping a homogenous trajectory of these artists, but in so doing was also creating limitations for how each individual artist's practice differed from others' (Powell 1995). Nettleton notes how Maswanganyi was able to maintain his ancestral roots in his work and yet continued pursuing subject matter within the context of the 'art' world (2000: 35). This includes portrayals of national political leaders and other figurative images, and notably the *Shaka* series. Nettleton does not go into great detail as to why he began portraying versions of a heroic African history that was not necessarily part of his Tsonga heritage, other than suggesting that these were reminiscent of textbook illustrations (2000: 35).

[42] According to Fiona Nicolson, Ditike Art and Craft Centre was established in 1985 as a 'cost' centre for the Venda Development Corporation (VDC). Its aim was to promote and market the work of artists working in the Venda region with a primary focus on 'craft' (see glossary in page 189) as opposed to 'Fine Art'. (Nicolson cited by Younge 1992: 64)

Highlighting these choices in Maswanganyi's practice is a means of interrogating whether or not Maswanganyi was in fact informed by his Tsonga heritage and, if so, to look closely at how this was conveyed in his art beyond the restrictions of the categories prescribed by what was written about the work.

It is clear that Maswanganyi's entry into the mainstream was facilitated through developing certain imagery for a particular market. In addition, in some instances, such as in Sue Williamson's *Resistance art in South Africa* (1989), particular pieces of his art were deliberately selected for inclusion to emphasise a political aspect. Williamson's publication provides an example of how these 'rural' artists were being framed collectively rather than as individuals, and also gives a poor account of how Maswanganyi understood his practice and market.[43] Although his oeuvre may suggest otherwise, Maswanganyi, like any other artist, was intuitive towards his environment and became increasingly aware of the kind of art he needed to produce and to which markets the different works appealed, hence the different kinds of subject matter and approaches he adapted. However, this does not necessarily mean that he could read the complexities of trading between differing markets and differing ideas of what constitutes collectable art.

Maswanganyi was also engaged in entrepreneurial activities where he acted as his own agent between his home and the art world of Johannesburg and Pretoria, and also as a middleman for women producing beadwork and pottery in Gazankulu and Venda (Nettleton 2000: 35). In the latter part of his career, Maswanganyi began exploring biblical themes. This, as Nettleton explains,

> was as much a result of a strong religious conviction as it was his awareness of international recognition afforded to other artists working with similar themes such as Johannes Segogela and Jackson Hlungwani. (2000: 35)

In 1989, works from the Standard Bank Foundation Collection of African Art and the Wits University Art Galleries Collections of African Art, and some selected works from the university's Ethnological Museum Collection, were exhibited at the Gertrude Posel Gallery in Johannesburg and later at the Grahamstown Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts. Boasting ten years of collecting after which it was titled (*Ten*

[43] Maswanganyi's biography reads as follows in the publication: 'Maswanganyi lives in Venda, and learned carving from his father. He decided if he could portray famous people his work would be valued. He enjoys carving politicians, and his dyspeptic portraits tread a fine line between parody and satisfying his market' (Williamson 1989: 49).

*Years of Collecting: 1979–1989*), the exhibition, accompanied by a catalogue, showcased a collection of southern African art from various ethnic groups and periods categorised accordingly. Maswanganyi's work was featured in this major exhibition along with the group of artists discussed in an essay by Elizabeth Dell titled 'Transitional sculpture' (Dell 1989). Once again Maswanganyi's short biography, as narrated by Dell and Maswanganyi himself, describes him as an apprentice to his father, who passed on his traditional wood carving skills of traditional objects. These objects later changed to serve two diverse markets (Dell 1989: 47). Another large-scale exhibition followed in 1989, *Images of wood: Aspects of the history of sculpture in 20$^{th}$ century South Africa*, but unlike previous exhibitions of this scale it included rural artists as part of a larger context examining the history of sculpture in South Africa. The way Maswanganyi's biography is written may have come from the artist's relating of his own history but it also exemplifies the kind of standard narrative each of the five artists this study examines followed. Although some were indeed more successful than others, the similarity in their trajectory in relation to their participation in exhibitions demonstrates that the manner in which these artists were received and adopted by the art markets has become entrenched in the South African art-historical narrative of the 1980s and 1990s.

### 3.2.2 Jackson Hlungwani (b.1923?–d.2010)

The appearance of Jackson Hlungwani's work in the *Tributaries* exhibition played an even more significant role in the way his artistic practice was appropriated into the mainstream art scene. Of all the artists in this group, Hlungwani was the most widely documented, but before he was considered an artist he was and remained a spiritual healer of a church he started in his home village of Mbhokota in Limpopo. There he built a shrine that consisted of sculptures he had carved to use in his teachings of the Christian faith. He named the site where he held sermons for his followers and worshipped God. New Jerusalem. From the early 1980s the site became 'a place of pilgrimage not only for the members of Hlungwani's church, but also for art critics, art historians, anthropologists, students of religion and art dealers' (Nettleton 2012: 7).

Following this exposure, Hlungwani became a mythologised figure in the art

world owing to what Nettleton observes is ‘a view of the artist as a shaman resuscitated from an older, romantic and almost entirely European understanding of “other” peoples’ (2012: 8). This she attributes to a perception that Europeans had and some still hold towards ‘others’, who are sometimes seen as less tainted by modernity and therefore closer to the mythical realm than the contemporary world (2012: 8). Khwezi Gule argues that this perception presents a challenge for art commentators writing about Hlungwani’s work, particularly in relation to what he points out as ‘the limits in the language used to describe his work’ (2012: 53). Gule admits that he himself has been a victim of such limits of language and stresses the importance of establishing that ‘there is no such thing as a “rural artist” or a “Limpopo artist”’ (2012: 53). While Gule seeks to address the larger question of determining ‘the extent to which language shapes or limits the reception of the artwork itself’ (2012: 53), he more importantly draws our attention to why it is necessary to conduct in-depth research into the artist’s contextual framework so as to avoid speculative readings of the work (2012: 56). For Gule, this includes inquiries about ‘whom and what the artist is inspired by, whom do they discuss their work with, how they understand the social value of their work’, all of which have implications for analysing works of art in both art criticism and art history (2012: 53).

Terms such as ‘transitional’ art, ‘traditional’ art, ‘township’ art, or even ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ are thus for him in some ways intuitive in that they are more about what the discursive space of language and our imagination offers at a particular time.

Gule notes how similarly in Africa — despite the contentious notion of ethnicity as a colonial invention — an artist’s identity is often bestowed based on ethnicity, which he asserts is insufficient because it presumes that an artist’s production is best understood through the lens of their ethnic identity (2012: 56). He adds that while there is an assumption that ‘rural’ artists or self-taught artists are more heavily informed by intuition and this does not mean that these are not part of their artistic practice, but rather that this becomes a concern when the work is talked about primarily in those terms (2012: 56–7). Gule concludes by asserting that Hlungwani’s work presents ‘a provocation and a challenge to the mainstream art world in that it is not necessarily meant for the art world and therefore requires multiple points of reading. (2012: 57)

This presents a greater challenge to consider, given that Hlungwani's work — which was made for a particular place and time — can no longer be viewed in its original context. Although *Tributaries* did not have a direct impact on the way Hlungwani's work was marketed, it did contribute towards its appropriation in that it presented it in a manner in which it was not intended to be viewed. Following his inclusion in the *Tributaries* exhibition, Hlungwani's work was featured in the *Out of Africa* exhibition held at the Market Gallery in 1986, followed by a joint exhibition with Nelson Mukhuba in 1987, also at the Market Gallery. In 1987 Hlungwani was part of the *VhaVenda Sculpture* exhibition at the Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown, and the *Vita Art Now* exhibition held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1989, and for which he won the AA Life Award. Later that year his work was part of the *Wood Sculpture* exhibition at the Iziko SA National Gallery in Cape Town and *The Neglected Tradition* exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. This was followed by the *Jackson Hlungwani Retrospective* held at the Market Gallery in Johannesburg in 1989.

In 2012, another retrospective of Hlungwani's work was held at the Polokwane Municipal Art Museum, which, according to curator Amos Letsoalo, presented a different set of challenges. The main issue was that two of Hlungwani's most important works, *Altar of God* and *Christ's Altar*, were not included. These were sold to the Wits Art Museum and the Johannesburg Art Gallery respectively in 1989. Given that this was Hlungwani's first retrospective in a museum in his home province of Limpopo (in other words, a place closely linked to where the works were created), it was important for the curator that these works be included, in order to give viewers a better understanding of Hlungwani's practice and of the site he built in Mbhokota. Their absence thus validated Letsoalo's curator's note included in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, in which he advocates for the 'repatriation' of Hlungwani's work (Letsoalo 2012: ii). Although one could argue that this is not as simple as returning the work, because Hlungwani willingly sold these to the two institutions, Letsoalo presents a strong case for exploring the possibility of experiencing the work in relation to the site as opposed to its placement in the art gallery. However, this would require a substantial amount of infrastructural and financial support from a government entity such as the Department of Arts and Culture or the National Heritage Council, whose mandate includes engaging with the

possibility of such initiatives.

### 3.3 The curatorial turn

In a recent essay on curating African art, Mary Nooter Roberts questions why many contributions to African art studies have predominantly been realised through museum exhibitions and related publications (Nooter Roberts 2012). Although Nooter Roberts is referring specifically to exhibitions of 'traditional' African art, her argument is pertinent to other aspects of African art because it not only seeks to examine this question for students, scholars and curators but also to interrogate whether or not this has stimulated a new understanding in the field. More importantly she draws attention to the fact that 'a defining aspect of the field of African Art history is the degree to which exhibitions have shaped an understanding of the arts of the continent' (2012: 2).

On this question she offers three possible answers, one of which I argue is applicable to the case of the *Tributaries* exhibition. In Nooter Roberts's view, exhibitions have the potential to reach broader audiences if the exhibitions presented by curators challenge the assumptions and stereotyping of African art forms (2012: 5). In so doing, she explains, 'they employ or defy ideological construction so as to present new domains of thought — and so effect a *turn*' (2012: 5).

Following this, I argue that Burnett's intervention can be seen as an attempt at challenging the norms of museum practices, first by staging the exhibition in an unconventional space, and second by including objects that until then had not been seen displayed alongside contemporary art pieces in any exhibition. According to Terry King, the impressive scale of *Tributaries* and the extent of media coverage it received, as well as the large audience attendance, all played a contributory role in the transmission of cultural values in South African art. Such exhibitions, he argues, presented themselves as opportunist, firstly by attempting to present something different for the (international) art world, and secondly by trying to eradicate a national guilt, where objects that were once disparaged were suddenly included as national art.

This may not have been the stated intention of the exhibition, but one could argue that it created a façade, through the incorporation of both traditional objects and works by 'rural' artists, which created an impression that this was an attempt to place African art on par with Western modern art (King 1987: 41–42) — a façade, which

King points out, tends to deal narrowly with content rather than interrogating how exhibitions could reflect patterns of cultural dominance. In King's view, 'art exhibitions mirror the structuring of social relations and for this reason form part of the content of art historical writing' (1987: 39). This, he explains, is not to suggest that exhibitions or contributing artists consciously cultivate cultural dominance. Rather, he argues, this structuring has consequences for what he calls 'the "promotional tone" often adopted for topical published criticism' (1987: 40). Topical published criticism constitutes, in this instance, confident observations on the exhibition which are explicable as part of the exhibition's total impact (1987: 40).

It is important to note that published criticism tends to construct a readership, which in national exhibitions, King points out, is reflective of sets of reader expectations. These expectations not only formulate an identity around the exhibition but in so doing also become 'complex aspects of a range of documentary sources that contribute to the historical knowledge and evaluative role of art history' (King 1987: 40–41). This creates a sense of ambiguity that, he observes, has left historians with the predicament of having to make accurate analyses of the import of works included in such exhibitions. As a result, he explains, the public become susceptible to accepting the packaged convenience of what are often 'national' exhibitions defined as clear markers along a historical route, which has consequences for how art history treats such exhibitions.

These exhibitions are thus, according to King, conveniently coalesced into a 'manageable package', which, he argues, facilitates their incorporation into history, thereby elevating their importance in relation to other fragments of knowledge. Usually accompanied by catalogues, large-scale exhibitions are often narrated in a chronological order that prescribes a particular understanding or interpretation of an exhibition, an argument King substantiates by citing Kuspit on the possibility of artworks' 'conforming to sets of conditions determined in part at least by the external expectations of media and audience' (1987: 44). Kuspit's view is that in some exhibitions the 'audience's expectations in some sense become part of the art' (Kuspit, cited by King 1987: 41). King thus explains that the role of such exhibitions is often foregrounded in the formation of written commentaries that tend to remain the eventual repositories of art historical values. As a result, such exhibitions become part of 'a process of cultural distribution, one that usually conveys an assimilated and

sometimes rarefied version of the content of the exhibition itself' (King 1987: 58). More important for this discussion, however, is that the exhibition 'fosters a more in-depth discussion of exploring the reasons for those exhibiting artists having access to such processes, and by extension, the reasons for the limits of access' (King 1987: 60).

The discussion around the large-scale exhibition in relation to King's deliberation is an attempt to explore why an exhibition like *Tributaries* featured so prominently in the South African art-historical narrative at a particular period, and why many of the artists (especially the 'rural' artists) have since disappeared from view. King's argument thus offers possible clues as to why certain texts tend to 'become encoded into a body of knowledge about these types of exhibitions' (1987: 39–57). He remains cautious about selection processes and how they sometimes 'impose limitations that ultimately influence the meanings of the works' (1987: 40). In his view, contemporary critical writings on such exhibitions have a tendency to place emphasis on the exhibitions as the primary vehicles of publication and knowledge, often to the detriment of the artists and the work they present. He thus points to the significance of cataloguing as a source of this knowledge, a source that I employ to highlight how some of these exhibitions have produced the attitudes and assumptions they did around certain artists.

As discussed earlier, *Tributaries* essentially brought together two types of artists: urban, trained and 'rural', untrained artists. The clear differences between these categories, and the subdivision of one into urban black and urban white artists, is, I have argued, based on the level of access the various artists had to the art market, in other words their proximity to, and ability and means to participate in, the discursive spaces of major art centres. In *Tributaries* another category, the 'rural traditional', comprised of functional objects made for a specific purpose, which were not necessarily considered 'artworks' in the respective communities they came from. These included the Ndebele works and Lobedu guardian figure (Fig. 21) mentioned earlier and two pole figures (Fig. 22), four beaded Ndebele dolls (Fig. 23), three Ndebele *mapoto* (married women's aprons) (Fig. 24) and three Ndebele dancing maces (Fig. 25), all of which were displayed without the names of the makers, being identified rather according to the ethnic groups from which they came, as was the convention for the display of traditional African art at the time.

In South Africa this convention was deployed in the late 1970s when the Standard Bank Art Collection entered into a partnership with the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. The partnership was described by Professor Alan Crump, then director of the Wits Art Galleries, as expressing 'the true ideals of both private enterprise and public education' in a commemorative exhibition showcasing ten years of collecting (Crump 1989: 1). Jointly owned by both Standard Bank and Wits University, the collection came about out of a growing 'concern for preserving the cultural heritage of the black population and the accelerating interest of foreign dealers and collectors who were removing the works from the country' (Crump 1989: 1).

By the time *Tributaries* opened, the collection had developed in several directions, with a particular focus on southern Africa. Along with a large number of traditional African pieces there were a few 'rural' artists' works in 1979 when the collection was started. The exhibition thus took place at a time when debates on the status of contemporary art by artists living in the rural areas were being considered in the context of 'Fine Art' in the South African art narrative. As Gule suggests:

> At the outset, it is important to stress that deliberating over works of art for a large exhibition is not only a political act, but it has the potential of canonizing particular modes of art making and highlighting new forms of expression. (2004: 13)

The nuances of how particular art forms were canonised under the rubric of 'African art' are in some ways illustrated by how these two institutions acquired and collected work. Through their grant from the Standard Bank, the Wits University Galleries invested in acquiring certain works of art to form the Standard Bank Collection of African Art. The scholarship and knowledge they produced about these pieces thus guided a particular understanding about these objects in the collection. Although, as noted by Alan Crump, the sponsor (Standard Bank) adopted a policy that would not dictate or prescribe what type, kind or area of African art should be acquired (Crump 1989: 1), the collection started to place a particular emphasis on material from southern Africa from the early 1980s.

The making of such a collection hence established a precedent for certain kinds of artistic forms to be appreciated primarily for their aesthetic appeal as opposed to being regarded as ethnographic artefacts associated with display in ethnographic museums. Under these conditions the objects required a different kind of

contemplation since they were 1) displayed alongside artworks and 2) presented in an 'unconventional' space, as was the case with the *Tributaries* exhibition. This is important because, in *Tributaries*, most of the work in the 'traditional' art category was either loaned by private collectors or by institutions like the Pretoria National Cultural History and Open Air Museum. Indeed, there were differences between the treatment of this kind of art in the art market (commercial spaces) and institutions (public spaces), as such works were incorporated into both private and institutional collections, but these differences converged in a manner that, as suggested by Colin Richards, was 'an attempt at legitimation through pedigree and precedent' (1987: 77).

At this point it is important to return to why the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* features prominently in the discussion around *Tributaries.* As mentioned earlier, the two are similar because they each sought to present an exhibition representing a wider view of contemporary art and therefore raised similar debates around questions of representation between Western modes of art and non-Western forms of art making.[44] The other similarities between the two exhibitions, apart from the number of artists they featured and the equal distribution of the combination of non-Western and Western artists[45], includes the way both employed similar strategies in dealing with issues of the display of non-Western art within Western institutional structures. *Magiciens de la Terre*, like *Tributaries*, carried some underlying assumptions, which in the case of *Magiciens de la Terre* raised questions about the exhibition's approach to the issue of cultural authenticity (Buchloh 1989: 151). In an interview with Jean-Hubert Martin, Benjamin Buchloh questions whether or not 'the exhibition originated from critical discussions around the broader ramifications of cultural decentralization' (1989: 152). He poses this question because there was also another possibility of viewing the exhibition as 'just another exercise in stimulating an exhausted art world by exhibiting the same contemporary products in a different topical exhibition framework' (Buchloh 1989: 152).

The larger question Buchloh seeks to address is whether *Magiciens de la Terre*

[44] In his introductory statement, curator of the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition, Jean-Hubert Martin, describes the exhibition as 'the first world-wide exhibition of contemporary art' and in so doing Martin is suggesting a singular idea of what constitutes contemporary art.

[45] I make the distinction between Western and non-Western artists because I do not believe that all the artists in this exhibition considered themselves as having an 'African' identity simply based on their biographical background, especially given that some were born outside of South Africa.

was critically and analytical aware of the debates around the issues of representation, the hegemony of class culture and the dominance of Western cultural practices and production over the rest of the world (1989: 152). He suggests that despite the pragmatic emphasis on 'aesthetic criteria', *Magiciens de la Terre* 'provoked scepticism among authorities in the art world whose precise role it is to defend the rigorous divisions and criteria of hegemonic culture' (1989a: 213).

In a further conversation, Burnett claims that while *Tributaries* and *Magiciens de la Terre* shared a similar exhibition model, they sought to present different ideas.[46] However, I argue that given that both exhibitions are located in a period where fields such as anthropology were reconsidering 'the problem of ethnocentrism, the relativity of culture, and intercultural relations' (Martin 1989: 153, 37), the two display similar approaches to dealing with these problems. The questions Buchloh raises in the interview with Martin are applicable to the *Tributaries* exhibition, not only because they address the treatment of contemporary art production on a global scale but also, Buchloh suggests, because they point to the fact that 'the discussion of decentralising is also related to issues of authorship and oeuvre' (Martin 1989: 152). This, as Martin responded, is because it also illustrated that in non-Western art the role of the artist and the objects' functions are defined with an entirely different notion to the Western (Euro-American) understanding of contemporary art (1989: 152). *Tributaries* raised similar concerns in that, like *Magiciens de la Terre*, it accentuated the intricacies and difficulties of including artists from different geopolitical contexts in exhibitions rooted primarily in a Western framework. There is the danger, as Buchloh aptly points out, of falling into 'the trap of again deploying ethnocentric and hegemonic criteria in the selection of participants and their works for the exhibition' (Buchloh 1989: 152).

Martin argues that this is, however, an inevitable trap, in that it is impossible to organise such an exhibition from an 'objective, acculturated' perspective, from a 'decentred' point of view'. While Martin was aware of the implications of placing work that did not necessarily belong in the 'art' realm in an exhibition, he asserts that he chose a personal approach, according to his own history and own sensibility (Martin 1989: 153).

There is also a sense of optimism in the curator Jean-Hubert Martin's view of *Magiciens de la Terre* that is similar to Ricky Burnett's thinking about *Tributaries* in

[46] Burnett, interview: 2015.

that both saw their exhibitions as ‘a major turning point in the social history of art and an indicator of hopeful directions for the future’ (Martin 1990: 110; see also Burnett 1997: 6) in their respective contexts. However, *Magiciens de la Terre*’s conceptual framework differed in some ways from that of the *Tributaries* exhibition in that it was more overtly intended to spark a debate, deliberately positioning itself within a much larger global consciousness described by Martin as ‘part of what was happening in the world summed up by *decolonization*’ (Martin 1990: 110). The comparison between these two exhibitions is nevertheless useful because both seemed to strategically position themselves as ‘an attempt at some kind of resolution, or at least a move on to a new plateau that would conflict with maintaining the primacy of the modernist canon’ (Martin 1990: 110).

However, *Magiciens de la Terre* did this more boldly and was thus bound to receive criticism from those who, as Martin says, were ‘primarily committed to the legacy of modernism’ (1990: 110). As a result he took an unconventional curatorial decision to focus on what he called ‘the primordial importance of the creator’ (Martin 1989: 8), whereas *Tributaries* accentuated certain ideas about African art through the formation of subcategories used to describe and enable the appropriation of particular art forms into a Western art-historical canon. Nonetheless, both created a particular perception, especially about the ‘untrained’ African artist. The subcategories that were created thus led to a disconcerting use of the term ‘rural’, which can be problematised in the same manner as ‘primitive’ in the case of *Magiciens de la Terre*. Both ideas have often been used in the sense of being ‘hyper’ African, usually associated with the kinds of activities related to the celebration of the exotic and the mystical. In other words, the artists categorised under the rubric of ‘rural’ art were ultimately characterised by the same standards and criteria initially employed to denote the ‘primitive’ in Western art discourse (Nettleton 1988: 301).

My assertion is that, in *Tributaries*, these standards were inexplicably connected to what Kenneth Coutts-Smith calls ‘elements of primitivism and cultural colonialism fused by myth, history and geography’ (Hiller 1991: 11), which in the case of the ‘rural’ artists was mediated by a definitive idea of what the notion of being rural is. In many instances this view obscured the identities of the artists who were assigned these mythical characteristics based on their spirituality, rituals and other traditional ceremonies that informed their artistic practices. But the use of terms such

as ‘primitive’ had other implications that, as pointed out by Susan Hiller, had to do with the way ‘human societies have a tendency to formulate ideas of the “other” in order to define and legitimate their own social boundaries and individual identities’ (1991: 11).

### 3.4 Conclusion

Although *Tributaries* was a privately sponsored exhibition, it left an indelible mark on the South African cultural landscape, firstly because of its scale and secondly because of the ambitious task of presenting a view of contemporary art in the country. This had never been attempted before and therefore posed a number of challenges for both the participants and the conveners of the exhibition. Whilst Burnett’s approach promoted heterogeneity, it also reinforced some assumptions and stereotypes about certain art forms and artists. However, this was further complicated by the exhibition’s ambiguous positioning between the commercial art world and the canon of African art that was challenged within universities and other institutions who objected to the kinds of separation that existed between ethnographic/cultural history museums on one hand and art museums on the other. This may explain why *Tributaries* features in the way it does in the art-historical narrative, as opposed to say an exhibition like *Neglected Tradition*, which had a strong emphasis on a research component. *Tributaries* thus features as part of a particular historical epoch and canon that alludes to the legitimation of ‘authentic’ African art. At the time there was also a growing concern about African artworks leaving the continent and so, inasmuch as *Tributaries* was conceived around ideas of diversity, exchange and the collective, it also exposed certain artists, in this case the ‘rural’ artists, to a market that would ultimately appropriate and frame them in a particular way.

There is a false assumption that Johannes Segogela participated in the *Tributaries* exhibition, a discrepancy I use to substantiate an investigation of this exhibition’s role in the reception and representation of the ‘rural’ artists it featured. This inaccuracy is recorded in various publications, such as the catalogue produced for Segogela as part of the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in 1995 as well as on numerous websites, such as the *Contemporary African Art Collection* by French collector Jean Pigozzi (Pigozzi n.d.). It is an assumption that, I argue, is based on

Segogela's framing as 'rural', and that also implies that there is a particular moment when Segogela began producing work that was considered 'contemporary'.

I therefore argue that the false assumption that some of the so-called 'rural' artists were included in this exhibition like Segogela, can be attributed not only to its status as 'ground-breaking' but also to its shaping of a particular narrative about these artists. In this narrative they were presented as a novelty and were ultimately left vulnerable because they were unfamiliar with a predominately Western market that had, prior to this, never bothered to engage with their work. My assertion is that their inclusion was in fact a result of a kind of ethnographic curiosity as opposed to a formalist exercise in curatorship, as is suggested by the curator and by commentators such as Jennifer Addleson (1985), Barbara Ludman (1985) and Inga Molzen (1985).

Another idea that has gained currency about the *Tributaries* exhibition is that it has been politically situated and constructed in historical accounts, despite the curator being adamant that he was not intending to make a political statement. However, Burnett must have known that because the exhibition sought to achieve something that had never been done before, it was in some sense political. Although it claimed to be presenting a 'view' of contemporary South African art at the time, its framing as a political event in historical accounts constructed particular ideas that have shaped perceptions of the exhibition as the eventual repository or determinant of what contemporary South African art would resemble. The exhibition thus shared a similar disconcerting sense of paternalism with the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition, where on one hand it showcased a wide range of artistic expressions whilst on the other still operating in a space that the separatist cultural and political ideologies of South African apartheid society were bound to permeate. Furthermore, it can be argued that although it in some ways worked against 'the primacy of the modernist canon' (Martin 1985: 110), *Tributaries* perpetuated, if not reinstated, certain ideas about what ought to be considered contemporary art. As argued by Marion Arnold, *Tributaries* 'was not promoting South Africa but rather exposing contemporary South African art' (Arnold 1985: no pagination). She claims that it sought to demonstrate that there was a diversity of work in the country but also showed that 'South African art is fragmented into many styles, and motivated by numerous different intellectual and sensory impulses' (1985: no pagination).

However, in demonstrating this the exhibition also created assumptions about certain art forms and artists — that they were not influenced by any Western culture and were therefore ‘authentic’.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE NEGLECTED TRADITION: TOWARDS A NEW HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICAN ART (1930–1988)

In this chapter I examine the exhibition titled *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930–1988).* It was a large-scale exhibition, hosted by the Johannesburg Art Gallery from 23 November 1988 to 8 January 1989. The chapter examines the content of the exhibition with reference to the reception of the 'rural' artists included, who, in relation to their black urban counterparts, featured less prominently in the stated objectives of the exhibition and in its final form. It explores the role of the exhibition in generating a particular kind of narrative about black art through the biographies it produced about 'rural' artists and some black urban artists — in that this was a selection from a pool of many other black artists — and interrogates the content produced for the catalogue as the remainder and reminder of the exhibition. In addition, this chapter seeks to establish to what extent the literature that followed further contributed to the way in which these artists ('rural' artists) were received and subsequently incorporated into the broader South African art-historical narrative that was established by the *Tributaries* exhibition of 1985. I acknowledge, however, that *The Neglected Tradition* exhibition had a different focus, one that sought to give a much broader account of the development over five decades of specifically 'black art'[47] in the country.

The exhibition was faced with certain challenges from the outset, in that it first had to grapple with assembling a fragmented and displaced narrative of black creative expression and culture. In order to revisit the neglected history of 'black art', curator Steven Sack notes how he was compelled to make crucial decisions, including whether 'to write about black art as a separate category or insert it into the mainstream' (Sack 1989: 7). In reassessing this history, Sack notes the importance of 'acknowledging the complexity and variety, as well as the degree of cultural interchange that has taken place within this history' (1989: 7). As a result, the work selected for inclusion was then grouped into categories that began to weave and connect a particular narrative — 'towards a new history of South African art' (Sack 1989: 7).

[47] Although the term "black art" is itself contested, I refer to it in this instance as a framework used by Sack in the choices he made for his selection for the exhibition.

Aside from its political stance and its function as a research project, one of the key objectives of this exhibition for Sack was 'to re-examine the prevailing notions of the nature of "black art" and indeed the definition of art', which he observes had for the most part been 'adopted unquestioningly from Western art traditions' (1989: 7). This, I suggest, affected the framing of the exhibition, in that it was held in an institution based on that same tradition. It therefore also involves an examination of the politics of display and representation, and how they played out in this case with the exhibition being held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG). It is important to note that JAG is a public, municipal institution governed by the City Council, which meant that from its inception it functioned differently from a national museum. It has always been governed and funded at a municipal level and so its status as an institution of national importance was attributed via a series of historical events, rather than being officially recognised. But this national status is itself debatable because at the time art museums in South Africa were off limits to all but white middle-class artists and audiences. The importance of JAG as an institution with a national reach was signalled in the late 1980s by a changing political landscape and the appointment of a new director.

In 1987 the director of JAG, Christopher Till, approached Steven Sack, a lecturer in the Department of History of Art and Fine Art at the University of South Africa (UNISA), to curate an exhibition of art by black South Africans. In an attempt to write a more integrated history of South African art, Sack and a team of researchers consulted the archive of newspaper reviews and existing literature, as well as artists, educators and members of community-based organisations, to establish the basic information required for the exhibition. As this occurred only three months prior to the exhibition's opening, Sack and his team were assisted by Matsemela Manaka,[48] who had begun to lay some of the groundwork in the field of black art studies that would look at questions of redress in South African art.[49] The exhibition featured 100 black artists, amongst whom were several 'rural' artists. It also included three urban white artists: Bill Ainslie, Cecil Skotnes and Edoardo Villa. Although Till points out

[48] Matsamela Manaka was a writer, director, actor, poet and cultural theorist living in Soweto. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Funda Drama Centre in Diepkloof, Soweto in 1978 and in the early 1980s worked with the daughter of the French ambassador, who was completing her Master's degree on black South African artists (Interview: Sack 2013). Manaka subsequently published his own book on the subject called *Echoes of African Art: A Century of art in South Africa* (1987).

[49] Interview: Sack, 2013.

that the exhibition was aimed at 'reflecting and re-evaluating South African art history by tracing the development and influence of black South African artists' (Till, in Sack 1989: 5), the inclusion of the three white artists was explained by Sack as being 'based on their integral relationships with the historical development of black South African art' (Sack 1989: 7). This relationship is discussed at a later stage in relation to patronage, changing social conditions and new educational influences, all of which were factors that played out differently for the 'rural' and urban black artists.

While the focus is on 'rural' artists, it is important to acknowledge that *The Neglected Tradition* exhibition included a diverse selection of black artists from different periods within the 58 years it covered. However, as pointed out by Anitra Nettleton, the exhibition seemed to favour artists 'working predominately within the paradigms of the Western art tradition, art that is considered "high art"'.[50] The dating Sack suggested was also meant to challenge the accepted narrative that identified the black Fine Art tradition as beginning with Sekoto, despite artists like John Koenakeefe Mohl and Ernest Mancoba predating him (Sack 1989: 2).

The disparities of black artists differed according to various factors, including the apparently opposed rural and urban, a duality on which Sacks places particular emphasis in both his essay about the 'rural' artists in the catalogue (1989:29) and also in an interview with the author (Appendix 2). While this duality was primarily based on the idea of opposing locales between the rural and the urban, Sack later elaborated on why he took this approach, which he chose to omit from the original transcript of his interview included in Appendix 2 of this study.

*The Neglected Tradition* thus sought to bridge a gap in, if not transform the history of, South African art. It confronted not only the challenges of rewriting history, but also the fragile nature of the archive and the fact that it is not always accurate and is at times inconsistent. Evidence of this unevenness can be seen in the

[50] New acquisitions of art by black artists, she observes, were of those artists who had 'received some kind of formal training in the canons of Modern Western art, a training which was largely urban based and still excluded other traditions of aesthetic production such as those from rurally-based artists' (Nettleton 1992: 10). The debate around what constitutes 'high art' is argued here against the notion of collecting objects as opposed to artworks; the distinction, she points out, is important to emphasise as it raises issues around modes of display and representation. The inclusion of artefacts in the form of a selection of objects made by black people, according to Nettleton, tends to privilege certain objects while detracting from others: 'This form of appropriation is intended to redress imbalances that have manifested themselves historically in the constitution of the collections, but it has the effect of valorising historical productions of popular aesthetic forms in one sector of South African society and denying aesthetic worth to parallel productions from other sectors' (Nettleton1992: 16).

biographies and commentaries produced about the various artists, in the written entries of the catalogue which I examine later in the chapter. For this reason the catalogue is a critical aspect of this study as its apparent comprehensiveness explains why the exhibition remains acclaimed as an important survey of the development of black art covering a particular period.

Generally *The Neglected Tradition* is viewed as a revisionist exhibition aimed at redress and reparation. However, I suggest that this view tends to detract from its potential as a starting point for further investigation of some of the artists, in this case the 'rural' artists it included, precisely because of the way it included them. The exhibition occupies a significant position in South Africa's art-historical narrative, located within what Nettleton describes as 'watershed years in South Africa's political transformation' (1995a: 65). It is significant also because it was overtly political in that it not only sought to change the exclusive narratives of South African art's histories, but in so doing also sought to highlight the process of transformation within institutions like JAG. At the time JAG had a strong desire to keep on par with international trends in curating and programmes aimed at greater inclusivity.

In a paper presented at the History Workshop organised by the University of the Witwatersrand in 1992, Nettleton discusses the history of two institutions (one an art museum and the other a cultural museum) in Johannesburg, one of them being JAG and the other the Africana Museum. Her assertion is that 'certain kinds of museums tend to privilege some objects over others in terms of value and potential significance to our understanding of culture' (1992: 1). The fact that such institutions were entirely partisan in relation to the cultures they represented, she argues, suggests that they not only followed a specific political agenda but also one that was closely linked to colonial structures and particular ways of thinking about the museum (1992: 1–2, 6). Nettleton's account thus highlights the historical attitudes associated with such institutions, particularly in relation to the discriminatory acquisition policies they maintained until recently (1992: 8).

Therefore, before discussing the exhibition itself it is important to consider the formation of JAG, because the establishment and the development of its collection, which later included some works from *The Neglected Tradition* exhibition, was peculiarly shaped by its formation. As pointed out by Jillian Carman, this history presents another dimension of the gallery in relation to its contribution to the

formation of a national identity in terms of South African art, as well as its institutional role in stimulating and encouraging scholarship in art making (Carman 2006: 91). *Yellow Houses: a street in Sophiatown, 1940* by Gerard Sekoto was acquired in 1940, and, while it was the first acquisition of a work by a black artist, it set a possible precedent for a different kind of narrative that subsequently became part of the history of the painting, the collection and the gallery.[51] The orthodox (colonial) narrative of the gallery was in a way disrupted by this acquisition, although Sack argues that the inclusion of Sekoto's canvas in the collection was partly because of the association of easel painting with the Western tradition (1989: 12).[52] However, it remained the only acquisition of a work by a black artist for the next 32 years: no further works by black artists were acquired until *The Neglected Tradition* eventually opened in 1989.

## 4.1 The Johannesburg Art Gallery and the history of black artists

Prior to *The Neglected Tradition* the JAG collection was based entirely on a Western tradition of Fine Art and craft. According to Joyce Ozynski, 'the decision to organize such an exhibition suggests a shift in the gallery policy and the changing balance of power in the community it serves' (1989: 276). While reviewing the exhibition, Ozynski argues that from its inception, JAG was 'embroiled within larger aims, ideals and purposes than a pure concern with art' (1989: 276–77). It was meant to be an 'educative force', one that would amalgamate the imperialist values and ambitions of the white upper class. Through the efforts of Lady Phillips,[53] whose social status and wealth allowed her access to mining capitalists and bureaucrats, JAG was established initially to serve as a museum of industrial design in addition to displaying works of art (Ozynski 1989: 277).

[51] In 2010 the Johannesburg Art Gallery celebrated 100 years of its collection. It was accompanied by a catalogue with illustrations as well as essays by some of the employees of JAG, in which it is stated that Sekoto's *Yellow house: a street in Sophiatown* was the first work by a black artists to enter JAG's collection.

[52] At this point it is also worth noting the fact that work by black artists had previously been shown in the South African Academy exhibitions in 1930 under a separate category of 'Special Exhibit by Native Artists'; however, when Sekoto showed at the Academy in 1939 there was no separate Native Exhibit category (Harmsen 1989: 287).

[53] Lady Phillips was the wife of Sir Lionel Phillips, who played an active role in the establishment and funding of the Johannesburg Art Gallery through his influence as a businessman.

Both Joyce Ozynski and Jillian Carman suggested that Lady Phillips may have been inspired by the British Museum Movement. Carman's extensive study describes this movement as ideologically rooted in the democratisation of social, political and economic structures of the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe and England (2006: 168–173). The majority of the works purchased for the collection were, as a result, British, with some from the Netherlands, France, Belgium and Italy. This was further consolidated by the choice of architect for the building of the gallery. Ozynski notes that Sir Edwin Lutyens was selected as the architect, despite the opposition of an established architectural association (the Transvaal Association of Architects), and in the tradition of British imperialist ideals he designed the gallery in a classicist style. However, as pointed out by Carman, this information is contested because of what she says is 'an exaggerated account' in the details of both Hugh Lane's and Edwin Lutyens' involvement in the making of JAG (2006: 5). Ozynski concludes that the dynamics played out were rooted in a cultural battle between the 'two white "races" in their common struggle against the economic and cultural domination of the Empire' (1989: 278). However, the focus of the struggle began to gradually shift with the demise of imperialism and the emerging ideology of nationalism, which Ozynski describes as 'South Africanism'. A phenomenon of the white working class, 'South Africanism' excluded the majority black population and, like imperialism, was a segregationist ideology primarily rooted in racism. Owing to the specific political and economic circumstances in South Africa at the time of its inception, the JAG was therefore intertwined with these separatist ideals, intended to serve the interests of the ruling class and 'play a part in perpetuating the class's hegemonic position by validating its cultural ideology' (Ozynski 1989: 279).

The cultural landscape of South African society began to reshape itself in the 1980s when, as observed by Brenda Danilowitz, 'revisionist agendas started to surface among members of the art world establishment' (1990: 94). For the gallery, this was a self-reflexive phase that led to a desire to amend its discriminatory and exclusionary past. However, this reflexive phase may have developed at an earlier stage with the appointment of Anton Hendriks as the curator in 1937, as he progressively began acquiring works by South African artists. Hendriks's inclusion of Sekoto seems to suggest that he saw Sekoto as part of an emerging South African art canon, but nonetheless one that still looked at European art as superior to South

African art. His selection of South African works that were displayed in the Gainsborough Galleries[54] was subjective and played a role in developing an idea of what was to be seen as tasteful and sophisticated at the time. A decade later, a South African Room opened at JAG, which, Ozynski argues, was initiated to lay 'claim to a national culture, rather than make a statement of it' (1989: 278). The idea of a national identity is expanded later in this chapter, as its significance in the case of *The Neglected Tradition* is somewhat diminished by the intentions of the exhibition. It should, however, be noted here, because the exhibition gave the impression that it was an attempt to provide a 'national' overview of art history by seeking to incorporate the history of black artists into what was then thought of as a South African art-historical narrative.

It is important to outline the status of black artists under apartheid in relation to the history of institutions like JAG, but it is equally important to be attendant to the kinds of activities in which black artists were engaged, outside a purely or exclusively political framework. Although the catalogue and the exhibition itself made strides in mapping these activities, the content is somewhat wanting as it was constructed within the limitations of an exhibition. In an article that speaks about the notion of *histories* as opposed to art *history*, Thembinkosi Goniwe aptly cites art critic Colin Richards in his declaration that 'a history of South African art has still yet to be written' (Richards, cited in Goniwe 2009: 25). Goniwe raises concerns about 'the discourse of art histories writing in, of and about South African art', asserting that it is 'a challenge to simply talk about history in singular national terms' (2009: 25). In some ways these concerns have started to be addressed, given the production of recent publications like *Visual Century: South African art in context 1907–2007* (2007), to which Goniwe was a contributor. Nonetheless, Goniwe's discussion about the writing of art history highlights some significant gaps that remain unaddressed, particularly the idea that *The Neglected Tradition* and its documentation served to be a catalyst for the writing of a new history. Goniwe's argument is that, despite efforts made by curators, such as Sack's endeavour to further knowledge about black art, few researchers have looked at the conditions and practices of black artists during apartheid outside of the limits of the socio-political context.

[54] The Gainsborough Galleries opened in 1937 and exhibited mostly South African works.

## 4.2 *The Neglected Tradition* and the 'Fine Art' tradition of South African art history

The notion of 'South Africanism' became a construct that diffused into aspects of cultural life 'along with the growth of local capital led by the manufacturing sector' (Ozynski 1989: 278). At this stage of the late 1980s a South African art canon was emerging with the production of publications such as Esmé Berman's *Art and artists of South Africa* (1983) and Grania Ogilvie's *Dictionary of South African Painters and Sculptors* (1988). These began to map out what would be considered South African art according to criteria established by the authors. However, in a review of Ogilvie's publication, Brenda Schmahmann highlights the subjective nature of compiling an art dictionary. She indicates that the process of selecting which artists are included and excluded is not always as objective as the authors claim.[55] In Berman's case, for instance, the criteria for inclusion were based on museum and gallery representation as well as the receipt of major awards or major commissions. However, Schmahmann argues that, given the manner in which material for this dictionary was established (based on a handbook of Berman's broadcasts and articles), Berman was, in essence, presenting evaluative rather than factual information (1989: 290). This approach was criticised in other instances by other writers, including David Paton in his review of the republishing of Berman's original *The Story of South African Painting* (1975). Paton notes how, since the publishing of the first edition, Berman had established herself as an authoritative voice on South African art, producing a number of publications that had been starting points for many scholars. Similarly, he cautions that, by not referring to other texts or authors in the process of establishing her 'facts', Berman's account became 'highly subjective and dangerously submerges itself as fact in the minds of students' (1996: 98). Schmahmann argues that Ogilvie made 'an effort to avoid devoting more space to artists 'for whose work there is respect at the expense of those for whose work there is little' (1996: 290). She suggests that Ogilvie's attitude, denoted by the title given to the dictionary, thus demonstrates a lack of impartiality. (1996: 290)

[55] It is a terrain that art historian Anitra Nettleton emphasises is 'shark-infested and thus important to bear in mind that all histories are the histories of those who write them and that for that reason art histories are particularly non-objective' (Nettleton 1989: 287).

The question of impartiality also had to do with the debate around the inclusion and exclusion of certain art form/expressions and the bias towards two-dimensional arts over other forms like mixed media and ceramics. The former, as indicated by Schmahmann and by Nettleton (1992), alludes to traditional notions of 'high art' and introduces the contentious debate around the hierarchal distinction between 'Fine Art' and 'craft', which Schmahmann asserts must be 'disrupted in the South African context as it limits the contribution made by black cultures and women in particular' (1989: 291). Furthermore, as argued by Paton, such distinctions had become outdated and limiting for students by the early 1990s when these publications came into review as resources for research (1996: 99). Such limitations were in some ways implied by Manaka's visual survey,[56] which in a similar tone of critique Frieda Harmsen reviews as arranged 'anachronistically' in that it begins with examples of rock art, photographs of mural art, ceramics, beadwork and basketry, all of which are still practised today in some rural areas (1989: 284).

*The Neglected Tradition* caused a disturbance in the order of the dominant narrative in that it fostered a move towards a more inclusive account of South African art history; however, this disruption was still framed within a Western tradition of art practice. It meant that certain art forms, such as traditional objects, would be excluded from this frame, because through the exhibition's very use of the term 'black art', similarly to the earlier idea of 'South Africanism' and its ambition to frame South African art, it sought to define a particular model of art made by black artists. Nettleton emphasises this by stating that

> in attempting to trace the origins of contemporary African 'Fine Art', Sack does not merely work from the preconceived Western notions of what could be included in the latter category, but is also keenly aware of the social and political issues at hand. (Nettleton 1989: 289)

Although Berman's dictionary predates Ogilvie's version by more than a decade, both publications affirm 'fine' art as a Western concept, one that excluded most of the creative expressions of black people. One could therefore argue that *The Neglected Tradition* emerged from a similar tradition and this was reflected by the structure of its catalogue. Despite Sack's attempt to expand the lexicon of South African artists,

[56] Manaka's *Echoes of African art: a century of art in South Africa* (1987) presented a different selection of artists and art produced by black artists.

he did not ultimately challenge the categories and genres of South African art. The exclusion of certain African art forms, such as beadwork and pottery for example, thus suggests that the conveners of the exhibition had particular ideas of what constitutes 'black art'. I therefore argue that this led to the inexplicable inclusion of 'rural' artists, whom Sack categorised under the rubric of 'New Generation Sculpture', a label that I assert not only indexes the precarious positioning of these artists within the exhibition but also illustrates the challenges he faced in dealing with what he described as 'a completely autonomous aesthetic' (Sack 1989: 27).

The challenges can be traced through exploring the structure of the catalogue and the categories Sack used to frame the works exhibited in the show. This may not have necessarily been the structure of the exhibition itself in terms of layout and display — a record of which does not exist — but it provides an overview of the ideological framework of the exhibition and may further explain the wider implications of the manner in which the 'rural' artists were inserted into the exhibition, for the writing of them into history. In the introduction, Sack describes the catalogue as a research resource, 'a departure for further detailed research that will hopefully yield a more balanced and comprehensive history' (1989: 7). Given that he saw this as initiating a discussion, it is not surprising that he also admits to inaccuracies and omissions in the biographies, the list of works and the bibliographies. My study is in a sense a further investigation of some of these omissions and inaccuracies in an attempt to establish an outline of how 'rural' artists were featured. It takes into account a more detailed review of the biographies of these artists so as to connect them to a larger historical narrative.

In the late 1980s institutions like JAG were faced with the dilemma of determining ways to include named black artists' works while also seeking to address the omission of traditional African pieces from its main collection. Discussions around display, representation and redress were therefore at the time hotly contested issues within institutions and the public domain.[57] The exhibition catalogue as a response to such debates, therefore, forms an integral part of establishing both how the canonisation of a broader South African art history was gradually being formulated, and what the afterlife was of this history following the end of the exhibition. *The Neglected Tradition* catalogue was highly regarded at the time of its

[57] See page 44 of Chapter 3 on the *Tributaries* exhibition.

publication, with some writers describing it as 'the most valuable publication for serious art students' (Harmsen 1989: 286) when compared with other publications like Manaka's *Echoes of African art: a century of art in South Africa* (1987) and Gavin Younge's *Art of the South African townships* (1988). All three were published at around the same time and seemed to be competing (although not explicitly stated) for a place in documenting the art-historical narrative of 'black art' in South Africa at the time. Of the three, *The Neglected Tradition* came across as the most credible and lucid, mainly because its approach as an invitation for further research, as opposed to the polemical overtone displayed by the other two publications (Harmsen 1989:286; Nettleton 1989: 289), allowed for a more nuanced perspective on art that had until then been overlooked. For Sack, as pointed out by Nettleton in a review of the three publications, the catalogue was an 'academic necessity in which the "neglected" tradition first had to be established in order to be set back into the wider context of South African art' (1989: 288).

Establishing this required a deeper questioning of the role of Western values and 'white intervention' in the work of black artists, a theme Brenda Danilowitz identifies as running throughout the catalogue. The ramification of this, she notes, is that 'the formative role and influence of African culture and traditions are less clearly delineated' (1990: 95). This, she suggests, is perhaps one of the shortcomings of the catalogue in that Sack 'deliberately picks a path between cautious criticism and descriptive outline' (1990: 94), an approach that she claimed demonstrated that Sack is fully aware of the challenges and pitfalls of the overview presentation while remaining mindful of its value in mapping out regions for deeper and more critical engagement. One of these pitfalls is its failure to address the question of patronage, which, Danilowitz claims, is significant for explaining the economic factors that have played a role in determining form and meaning in both traditional and contemporary African art. Despite these shortcomings, she notes, the catalogue provided a useful model that could be followed by other museums and more importantly illustrates the importance of its content as a catalyst for further research in the field.

Sack began his four-part essay in the catalogue by raising concerns about the necessity or viability of initiating such an exhibition and whether, as curator, he should have separated or incorporated art products in terms of the racial identity of the artists or similarities in artistic expression and styles (1989: 7). This could explain the

dilemma he faced with the placement of the 'rural' artists, because, unlike their urban black counterparts, these artists were arguably informed by a different set of influences. However, the very idea of an exhibition that focused exclusively on black artists suggests that the display, reception and writing around art in South Africa were indeed in need of revision. Sack used separate chapters to discuss the selected works and artists for the exhibition, namely 'The Pioneers', 'The Polly Street Era', 'The Rorke's Drift Art and Craft Centre' and 'The New Generation', and within these chapters sub-categories proliferated, including 'naïve art', 'folk art', 'ecclesiastical art' and 'transitional art' to describe 'black art' and frame it within particular kinds of narratives. Mapped out chronologically, the catalogue begins with 'The Pioneers', which refers to artists who had historical beginnings between the 1920s and 1930s and were based in two environments, the rural and urban. These include Tivenyanga Qwabe, Samuel Makoanyane, John Koenakeefe Mohl, Ernest Mancoba, Gerard Sekoto, Gerard Bhengu and George Pemba. What is most significant for this study is that, as Sack relates, prior to the 1960s opportunities for art education for black artists were limited, with a handful of mission schools offering art classes. Sack explains that these artists came from three interconnected groups: those living in urban settings, those living in rural areas, and those constantly moving between the two. Furthermore, he places them in a broader context that involved changing materials, new patronage and new educational values (1989: 9), categories that Ivor Powell, however, suggests 'do not convincingly sustain themselves as more than, at best, sub styles within a broader movement with limited themes explored through a limited range of media' (1995: 15).

Despite an acute awareness of the political and social framework in which these artists were working, Sack provides an inconclusive account of how an exhibition such as *The Neglected Tradition* eventually incorporated the artists it represents into the broader South African art-historical narrative. He discusses in some detail both contemporary and historical concerns around black art's being primarily understood in Western terms, but he does not engage in a critical discussion of the degree to which this affected the production of black art beyond the constraints of marginalisation and segregation. He constantly refers to dialectic of 'town and countryside', yet fails to develop this notion through themes alluded to via the catalogue. Instead he uses this distinction as a kind of poetic licence for 'urban' and

'rural', which is further divided into a stylistic synthesis that characterized black art with a problematic designation of sentimentality (Hill 2015: 17). This distinction is therefore better understood through the differences between untrained and trained artists, which as noted by Nettleton in a review of the catalogue, resulted in artists working in the rural situations "slowly being lionized by the galleries in urban areas" (Nettleton 1989: 289). It may be that there was simply no room to address these issues; however, in both the exhibition and catalogue Sack was mindful of the inadequacies of the overview as a means of representation of black art. Nonetheless, there have subsequently been studies that have developed a deeper, more critical engagement with certain artists, like Gerard Sekoto, Ernest Mancoba, Durant Sihlali, George Pemba and Dumile Feni, and these demonstrated that many of these artists were, prior to *The Neglected Tradition*, already working within urban circuits and thus had access to a wider art market and some training opportunities, unlike the 'rural' artists (Danilowitz 1990: 94).

That Sack was fully aware of the economic relations between producers and consumers is seen, for example, in his recounting the case of Samuel Makgoanyane and the form of patronage he received. Yet Sack shied away from critically engaging with some of the systems of exchange and support he suggested posed challenging to the production of black art (1989: 10). In addition, his use of certain terms is wanting. Some artists, for example, are referred to as 'discovered': Gerard Bhengu, for instance, was 'discovered' by Dr Kohler, who provided him with material; Tladi (Tlali) by Howard Pim; and Ezekiel Ntuli by Mr Stanley Williams. Furthermore, the paucity of references in the catalogue to such artists as Mose Tladi (Tlali), Job Kekana, Richard Makambula, Abenigo Zulu, Simon Mnguni and Arthur Butelezi indicates a need for continued research into the lives and bibliographies of these artists, all of whom managed to cross the racial and economic barriers of the early period of the apartheid regime during the 1930s and 1940s (Sack 1989: 12–13).

*The Neglected Tradition* catalogue created a perception that 'black art' in some ways occupied a separate realm from art produced by white South African artists and should therefore be understood and received in a particular way. In the catalogue, Sack's own experiences and involvement permeate the concluding section that covers the 1980s, where he discusses 'black art' in terms that establish that he (along with other writers, notably Powell) saw it as occupying a different space, and

various statements from black urban artists confirm this. Artist David Koloane, for example, observes that many art dealers did not believe that some genres of art created by black artists were authentic because they looked 'un-African' (Koloane, cited by Powell 1995: 18). He explains how his own work was often under scrutiny, primarily because it did not fulfil the expectations among white commentators and patrons of what African art should look like.

Whilst Sack's account sought to break away from a Eurocentric bias that publications such as Berman's were grounded upon, it also raised concerns and controversy around the training of black artists (Harmsen 1989: 286). It presented a range of paradoxes with regard to artists such as Gerard Bhengu, Koenakeefe Mohl and George Pemba, whose work could not easily be defined within the narrow definition of black cultural heritage (Harmsen 1989: 286). As pointed out by Gule, while these artists focused on the subject matter in their environments, they still worked predominantly within a European aesthetic of art making (2010: 122). The catalogue's acknowledgement of the gaps around museums and the limitations they present offers a bridge for exploring alternative perspectives such as those presented by writers like Ivor Powell, who looked at the mainstream art production by black South African artists, particularly although not exclusively, during the apartheid years. He claimed that there was no real way of proving a tangible connection between the manner in which black art has been controlled and developed through white markets and its relation to the 'noxious fictions of apartheid' (1995: 16). Furthermore, he states that because this was a time when 'the rules began to gradually and subtly evolve and change in terms of the implicit definition of art within the white establishment, it brought about a different iconography and content' (1995: 13).

He notes this particularly in relation the 'rural' artists and their appropriation into a new market. Powell's commentary is critical in this regard, placing the emphasis on the fact that most black artists had to function within what he refers to as 'a cash economy system that is predominately controlled by art dealers and buyers, the majority of whom are white' (1995: 15). A category like 'township art', he suggests, can thus be 'looked at in the broadest sense, as a basic assumption that whites wanted to nurture around their compatriots' (1995: 16).

In a critical review written for a catalogue to accompany an exhibition curated by Burnett ten years later, Powell discusses the shortfalls of this kind of thinking by

exploring modernity in an African context and aligning it to questions around authenticity and patronage, specifically in relation to black artists — both urban and rural. He observes how historically the relationship between white patrons and collectors and black artists in South Africa has remained 'archetypal' (1995: 12), where black artists are encouraged to produce a particular kind of subject matter that was for the most part considered by white patrons and collectors as identifiably 'African' (1995: 15). He claims that such relations have had an influence on the way in which these artists were subsequently promoted and marketed, and explains that although some of these artists have historically remained in the condition of curio makers, others have managed to transcend this and build reputable careers within the mainstream 'art' market (1995: 12-13).

'The Polly Street Era', the second of Sack's catalogue chapters and exhibition sections, pertains to the period during which the Johannesburg Local Committee for Non-European Adult Education was established in consultation with the Johannesburg City Council. Cecil Skotnes was appointed Cultural Recreation Officer at the Polly Street Art Centre in 1952, and through this position he became an influential figure in the development of a large number of artists during the 1950s and 1960s. Sack discusses the centre within a socio-political context, placing emphasis on the circumstances that affected the production of art amongst urban black artists. Yet he does not fully critically engage with the Western values that underlay the entire art sector and the intervention made by collectors in the work of these artists. As Brenda Danilowitz observes, although possibilities for real mutual relationships may have existed between white teachers or mentors and black students, it seemed inevitable that at the time the success of every black artist was generally guarded by white interest — which had the economic means to support such art — and thus encouraged certain forms of production by black artists. She notes how in the history of the Polly Street Art Centre, for example, it is not clear how influential African culture and tradition was, and that this should prompt further investigation (1990: 95).

Sack distinguished two distinct styles of art produced at Polly Street: the 'township style' and a 'neo-African style'. The township category he further divided into two styles: 'an accurate recording of specific places in the township and a more generalised approach resultant in the repetitious stylisation of picturesque "shantytowns"' (1989: 15–16).The term 'township style' also evokes the idea of the

'unspoilt' African artist, which is insinuated in a number of writings with reference to the centre and in statements made by Cecil Skotnes cautioning 'that he might be destroying something' (Skotnes, cited by Sack 1989: 15). Louis Maqhubela makes a similar observation, referring to how he often clashed with his teacher Cecil Skotnes on Skotness's insistence that black artists did not require any kind of tuition because of their natural ability to paint, and Durant Sihlali observes this distinction when describing how white artists were often reluctant to share their knowledge with black artists because they believed they were different (Sack 1989: 15). Powell elaborates on this in relation to 'the way art has typically been taught — or not taught — to South African blacks in the past', when he observes that

> institutions like Polly Street did not effectively stand outside of the apartheid system especially with policies that listed that formal instruction was misguided and that 'natural' talents should instead be fostered. (1995: 17)

Sack's discussion of the Rorke's Drift Art and Craft Centre probes the distinctions between art and craft. Established in 1962, Rorke's Drift Art and Craft Centre differed significantly from Polly Street Art Centre in that it was rural-based as opposed to urban. This section of the catalogue is more attentive to the development of black art in relation to the art market and discusses marketability and trading of art and craft, acknowledging the tensions between the two. Sack hints at underlying gender issues, but does not examine these further except through highlighting the use of approaches and material designated for male and female artists — although he touches on contentious debates around craft's association with women and Fine Art with men, and how this informs both practices in particular ways through the example of artists such as Azaria Mbatha (1989: 21). Rorke's Drift continued to play a significant role in the education of black artists throughout the 1960s and 1970s until its closure in the early 1980s.

The discussion of Rorke's Drift is followed by yet other categories: the 'New Generation' and 'New Generation Sculpture'. Both refer to a more politically conscious phase, which stemmed from numerous conferences such as the *State of Art in South Africa* (1979) held in Cape Town and the *Culture and Resistance Festival* (1982) held in Gaborone, Botswana. By this time art had increasingly became an arena for political activity and the reappraisal of definitions of art resulted in a broader approach towards teaching. A more diverse range of centres began to emerge,

representing a significant new force in the field of black art education. Artists began to interact more closely, yet the divides between Fine Art and community art, and self-taught versus trained became more evident (Sack 1989: 24–26). Yet the divide between rural and urban became blurred, with more rural artists commuting between the two environments more frequently. Sack's discussion looks rather sparingly at the formal developments of the art produced in these apparently contradictory spaces of rural versus urban, art versus craft, and Western versus African, which leaves the discussion somewhat wanting in its failure to interrogate terms such as 'transitional', 'naïve' and 'folk', formulated at the time to describe this type of art.

By the end of the 1980s when *The Neglected Tradition* was staged at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, more art centres such as Katlehong Art Centre, the Community Arts Projects in Cape Town and the Funda and Mofolo centres in Soweto had emerged, with more black trainers and mainly in urban areas. The art market was broadening and expanding, with artists using different kinds of material and new imagery, and using more opportunities for formal training. As Sack observes, the reassessment of the notion of Fine Arts began and academic research became increasingly aware of the limited definitions of art. 'The New Generation' and 'New Generation Sculpture' as Sack classifies it, indicates the reappraisal of these definitions, where a broader approach has been taken (1989: 24). This did not mean that the limitations set by museums and galleries on the definitions of art had been resolved but rather that this categorisation raised questions, because in some respects, although not explicitly stated by Sack, categorisation of this kind only applied to black artists and not to white artists (Sack 1989: 24).

'The New Generation' category, although not clearly articulated, offers a better glimpse of avenues for further research about some of the artists and their work. This is because it maps out the emergence of these art centres, which became instrumental in shaping the development of black art in South Africa. It paints a diverse picture of centres training black artists, one that Sack notes awaits evaluation in terms of its impact on South African art (1989: 25). 'The New Generation' is also characterised by 'the dialogue between South African artists and the cross fertilisation of ideas as well as workshops in which experiences are shared' (Sack 1989: 25). While these workshops received criticism — often being seen as imposition — they also 'provided invaluable insights into the problems of painting, colour and expressive

communication, mostly amongst artists with opportunities to experiment with new materials' (Sack 1989: 25). There was, according to Sack, a noticeable distinction between this type of art (usually made by trained artists) and the art produced by the self-taught artists. The tradition of self-taught artists was associated particularly with the 'rural' artists who were producing sculptures; this Sack categorised as 'New Generation Sculpture' (1989: 26).

Sack grouped 'New Generation Sculpture' into three sub-categories: 'ecclesiastical art'; 'the sculpture produced in Gazankulu and Venda'; and 'Fine Art' sculpture. (1989: 27) Besides occupying different historical epochs, all three sculptural approaches are markedly different in characteristics and intention. For this reason, Sack is critical of the label 'transitional art' used to describe the work produced in Gazankulu and Venda. However, it is in relation to his criticism of the label, which he describes as a phenomenon, that *The Neglected Tradition* exhibition's positioning of these artists is wanting. Instead of expanding the idea of 'transition or cultural synthesis', where different practices interface, and particularly in light of the stated principles of the exhibition that encouraged further research, Sack focuses on the economic and political factors affecting the work of these artists in the art market. His critique of the limitations imposed by labels such as 'transitional' constricts a more meaningful exploration that could challenge his conclusion that 'there was no prior cross fertilisation between western and African modes and this type of art' (Sack 1989: 26) To a certain extent Sack again points to possibilities for further research on some of these 'rural' artists. He does this with Nelson Mukhuba, noting that Mukhuba was able 'to carry most directly influences from the city back to his rural home' (1989: 28). In Sack's account this was owing to the fact that Mukhuba, like others (Dr Phutuma Seoka and Noria Mabasa), also made sculptures depicting white people in his artistic repertoire. While Sack points out that an important contributing factor to this was that many of the 'rural' artists had lived and worked in the cities under white employment for varying lengths of time, his inclusion of them in the exhibition does not adequately access how this exposure to urban spaces influenced their art.

## 4.3 The artists

### 4.3.1 Nelson Mukhuba (b.1925, d.1987)

Nelson Mukhuba had a relatively short-lived career, because in 1987, at the age of 62, he committed suicide. According to Nettleton, Mukhuba was the first of these artists to be exposed to the high art[58] market. Upon his return to Venda after working in Johannesburg as a carpenter and an electrician's assistant, he began carving domestic objects for local consumption and sometimes for outsiders (Nettleton 2000: 31). Mukhuba began reaching wider audiences from the early 1980s and although Nettleton suggests that a demand for his work arose after the *Tributaries* exhibition, it is important to note that his biography, as constructed by South African History Online (SAHO), states that he had been showing his works from as early as 1970 at places like the Michelangelo Gallery in Johannesburg[59] as well as on other platforms such as the Rand Show – Venda Pavilion in Milner Park, Johannesburg in 1980 (Sack 1989: 119).

Mukhuba was born in 1925 and was not only an artist but also a teacher and a musician. According to SAHO, his stay in Sophiatown ended in 1958 (SAHO n.d.), after living there from 1945. Between these periods he also 'began making ceramic figures, relief sculptures, wooden household utensils and tourist trade objects' (Sack 1989: 119). According to his biography in *The Neglected Tradition* catalogue:

> In the 1960s and 1970s Mukhuba formed various Marabi Dance Bands in addition to making recordings with groups such as 'The Zoutpansberg Merry Makers', 'Nelson and the Phiri Boys' and 'The Music Men', and founding a traditional group called Mahlombe-A-Mutandabinyuka. (Sack 1989: 119)

Part of the dilemma about where the 'rural' artists fitted into the South African expressive modes is illustrated by how an artist like Mukhuba, who was described as versatile, is portrayed. He is grouped with the 'New Generation Sculpture' in *The Neglected Tradition* catalogue, which in a sense created limitations for the display of his artistic repertoire. Some of Mukhuba's sculptures may have been influenced by his connection to dance; however, this tends to be overlooked in the discussion of his sculptural repertoire. Mukhuba's work often played with the idea of movement in

[58] See glossary in page 189

[59] South African History Online, People: Nelson Mukhuba, http://v1.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/makhuba-nelson.htm, accessed 30 May 2013.

static sculpture and this is illustrated by the work included in *The Neglected Tradition*, which is of a (European) *Dancing couple* (Fig. 16) standing firmly on feet, which form the base of the sculpture. Although the wood is painted, the surface has carving marks visible and the two figures are in a classic waltz pose, suggesting movement, which Mukhuba achieves by making certain parts of the figures more pronounced: their gestures, facial expressions and details on their clothing. The same treatment is given to a work like *Ballet Dancer* (Fig. 35), where it is clear that Mukhuba worked from a variety of references, and was also aware of the market to which this type of work would appeal.

The contemporary themes from his interaction with urban culture were often overshadowed by a perceived exoticism and mystique, which in a publication like Gavin Younge's emphasises and distorts to the extent of assigning Mukhuba a psychopathic personality (1988: 46). What this hides is that Mukhuba was a complex individual and had a unique approach to his art rather than the primitivist one portrayed by Younge's and Sack's framing of his work, even though Sack makes the point that 'it is important to look at the work of these artists in conjunction with the physical and spiritual context in which the work was produced' (1989: 28).

I argue that there is a great need to place emphasis on how Mukhuba's versatility enabled him to embody his ideas through his sense of formal solutions. Sack's and Younge's accounts of these artists' biographies, their treatment of these 'rural' artists, suggest that their inclusion served a political purpose, rather than focusing on the intentions or achievements of the artists. In Younge's case the artists were politicised through their classification under 'township art', and his use of this term in the title of his book. It is, however, not clear whether Younge is attempting to define 'township art' as 'black art' or use the label to illustrate how 'black' art could be positioned. Sack, on the other hand, focuses on the politics of the marketability of these artists. *The Neglected Tradition* catalogue formulates a better outline than Younge's of how these artists came to be situated in the mainstream art market. But it also falls short in mapping the trajectory of these artists and how the art market absorbed them. Nonetheless, it highlights an important aspect that connects these artists by their subject matter, which often used Christian religious themes with a combination of ethnic imagery (Nettleton 2000: 40).

### 4.3.2 Johannes Segogela (b. 1936)

Another artist who uses a similar combination of imagery is Limpopo-based sculptor Johannes Segogela. Like Mukhuba, when Segogela was first noticed, he was not only making non-functional objects but also selling his sculptures in both his immediate locale and in the cities. Born in 1936 in Sekhukhune, a former homeland[60] during the apartheid era, Segogela still lives and works there today. It is necessary to acknowledge that the religious connotations of Segogela's work can be problematised in many ways. However, in this instance I favour a more critical reading of his works, one that attempts to recontextualise them by dealing with the apparent binaries at play within them. It is therefore necessary to first give a brief trajectory of Segogela's entry into the 'fine' art market and his art production within the mainstream.

As recounted in Segogela's biography, he was first noticed in the early 1980s by gallery doyenne Linda Givon, the former owner of the Goodman Gallery[61], while selling his works on the side of the street in Rosebank. Rosebank is an upmarket suburban area in the north of Johannesburg and is one of the few malls that still has an 'African Art and Craft' market that deals in curios and tourist art. However, in an interview with Segogela, he had the following to say about how he first started carving and began selling his work:

> I can't tell you when exactly I first started carving. I grew up carving but it was never anything serious. I started late because I first worked and then I forgot about sculpting. I became very busy…around 1986/85. I then started to sell my work at a traders market, in Johannesburg in a place behind that big OK shop but I was not allowed to sell there so my work was confiscated. I was told to collect it in City Deep, do you know it? I managed to borrow money and get my work back. I was then told I needed a hawkers licence in order to sell outside the premises and that would take up to six months. Six months is too far… the police officer gave me information on

[60] Homelands were legislated by the Natives Resettlement Act No 19 of 1954. The Act gave power to the government to remove Africans from any area within and next to the magisterial district of Johannesburg. It was designed to give chiefs more local power but at the same time use them as puppets to control the homestead. Initially some chiefs rejected the Act; however, in 1976 Transkei became the first Black homeland to become 'independent' followed by others like Sekhukhune, Venda, Gazankulu and Bophuthatswana. (SAHO n.d.).

[61] The Goodman Gallery was first established in 1966 by Givon and is currently one of the leading commercial galleries dealing in contemporary South African art, representing some of the most prominent artists both locally and internationally. In 2008 Givon sold the gallery.

> where to go to get the licence, somewhere near Commissioner. There I was directed to Bree Street…corner Bree and something, I can't remember and what. I went to Bree Street and I received the licence same time. The same police officer later checked my licence and asked me how I had obtained it. She told me the licence was in order and legitimate except it was odd that I had applied for it and obtained it the same day, how did that happen? I told him I too did not know! She let me go and told me that the place where my work would be purchased was Rosebank, that there are rich white people that live there. I went to Rosebank and they bought and bought. Then one day this young man from America came and bought my work. He told me he knew a place where my work could sell well. And so he took me to the Goodman Gallery and even loaded some works in his car. We showed the work to Linda, and Linda bought it.[62]

By 1986 Segogela began exhibiting at the Goodman Gallery in a space demarcated for 'transitional' art and by the early 1990s had held one-man shows in the main gallery as well as exhibiting at international art fairs and major art exhibitions such as Art Basel (1989) and the Venice Biennale (1993). In September 1988, Segogela was one of three 'rural' artists (Noria Mabasa and Jackson Hlungwani were the other two) selected to participate in the third *Cape Town Triennial* (1988) with his entry displaying a typical tableaux of a contemporary scenario titled *Visitor from the USA, 1987* (Fig. 26). Resembling a miniature stage set, the work consists of a configuration of five small figures seated at a table with a door and the American visitor standing at the entrance, and typifies the characteristics of his work. It is one of Segogela's early works documented in a catalogue[63] and according to him the work was commissioned by Linda Givon, and is likely to have been referring to the American young man who first brought him to the gallery. Givon commissioned many other works, such as the *History Press* (Fig. 27), all of which, he explains, she asked him to make for her.[64] By this time the so-called 'rural' artists had become prominent on the art scene following their exposure through the *Tributaries* exhibition. As a result most of them became visible to a wider audience. Establishing a precedent for subsequent exhibitions, *Tributaries* became historically etched as the moment where 'ideas changed again, and the definitions of art within a mostly white art world began to gradually and

[62] Segogela, Interview: 2013 (translated from Sepedi).

[63] Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation, *The Cape Town Triennial* 1988, exhibition catalogue. Cape Town: Rembrandt Van Rijn Art Foundation. p 19

[64] Segogela, Interview: 2013 (translated from Sepedi).

subtly shift' (Powell 1995: 13). One could argue that Segogela's work has been hyper-canonised into a narrowed classification that privileges a particular narrative about his art — that it is religious iconography or witty social commentary — yet some of his work makes some robust political statements not only about South Africa's political landscape but more so about the art world in general.

In *The Neglected Tradition*, Segogela had two works featured: *Nebuchadnezzar* (Fig. 28) and *Table with four believers* (Fig. 29). These early works were centred on Biblical and Christian themes, but it was his later work consisted of multiple figures that shaped the reception of his work and its precarious position between the 'Fine Art' and 'craft' realm. In 1993 he exhibited alongside Willie Bester and Tommy Motswai at the Goodman Gallery in a show titled *Heroes*. By 1995, when *Devils Angels and Other Things* opened as part of the Standard Bank National Arts Festival Guest Artist award, Segogela's figures started to become more 'refined' in that his characters changed slightly. Their features became more exaggerated (e.g. their noses were more pronounced) and their eyes and hair started to resemble urbanised subjects, at times with European features. During this time his subject matter also started to become more critically reflective of current events concerning moral dilemmas yet it was still grounded in Biblical themes and Christian values. It nevertheless maintained its didactic, humorous appeal and remained centred on religious iconography while portraying specific identities that make commentary about the complexities of urban life (Nettleton 2000: 37–38).

Segogela's early exhibitions are not well documented but in the late 1990s the Goodman Gallery began producing postcards and small monographs of his work. He later took part in the 5th Havana Biennale in Cuba (1994) and 1st Johannesburg Biennale (1995). In 1998 his work titled *Nkosi Sikelela (Bafana Bafana)* (Fig. 30) was featured on the cover of the Arts and Craft Map guide for Gauteng Province. In 2003 his work was featured again at the Basel Art Fair in Switzerland, presented by the Goodman Gallery and featuring a work titled *Onlookers* (Fig. 31, which consists of a row of spectators and a hare. It shows a row of standing men who appear to be businessmen — some are tall and others are short — and all but one holding a pipe are carrying brief cases. One briefcase is inscribed '*US-D*' perhaps signifying economic development and referencing his exposure to an international market. Although Segogela insists on selling his work in a prescribed manner, as sets of say

two or more figures, he leaves the curatorial arrangement of some scenes solely to the buyer of the work; however, in some recent works the figures are fixed (Nettleton 2000: 38).

In 2004 *Revelations* opened at the Goodman Gallery, accompanied by a small monograph, and in the foreword Givon claimed that Segogela

> never attempted to enter into the formal arena of the visual arts per se and that he relies on a personal relationship with the gallery as his artistic anchor and home base as he has no access to communication due to his remote rural setting.[65]

She makes this claim despite his previously having obtained a hawker's licence and sold his work in both his immediate locale (through orders)[66] and at an urban market in Johannesburg. I argue that the perception of his work outlined by Givon has to do with what Kasfir says are 'assumed meanings for "traditional society" and by extension "traditional art"' (1992: 52), which create limitations for how we can best read and create new meanings for such works. The last show Segogela was included in at the Goodman Gallery was in 2007, where his work was shown alongside that of Elisa Kentridge and Billie Zangewa in a show titled *Social Fabric* at the newly opened Goodman Gallery Cape. In what was essentially a commercial exercise as opposed to an exploration of the artists' individual repertoires, Segogela's work received some criticism for being homophobic and for this reason seemed oddly placed in relation to that of Kentridge and Zangewa. The show had little to do with a deeper engagement as it was held in a commercial space and therefore came across as a sales-attracting exercise rather than stimulating a more nuanced interpretation of the work.

The curatorial interpretations of Segogela's works are broadly related to concepts around art making, i.e. public display and commercialisation of the work, as well as the display of a range of other factors related to the art market. In 1989 *Table with four believers* (Fig. 29) appeared in two major larger-scale exhibitions, *The Neglected Tradition*, and *Images of wood: aspects of the history of sculpture in 20th century South Africa*, curated by Elizabeth Rankin-Smith. The similarities between these revisionist exhibitions is that they both sought to redress the imbalances of art history in South Africa's cultural landscape, although the latter did so to a lesser

[65]Givon, L. 2004. Revelations by Johannes Segogela, *The Goodman Gallery Editions*. Johannesburg: Goldfields Press..

[66] Interview: Segogela, 2013.

degree than the former. The examples of Segogela's work they feature illustrate how his work moved into the 'contemporary' art realm as that of a 'rural' artist, but the choice also implies that this inclusion was part of a political and curatorial intent to introduce a 'nationalistic cultural resurgence', alluded to by *The Neglected Tradition*.

The question of how and why an artist like Segogela — and others categorised in the same bracket — were authenticated as 'contemporary' by exhibitions such as these is central, especially given that his work can be claimed to have emanated from an essentially 'tourist' market. This has been interrogated here through examining the entry and incorporation of his works into the gallery system (in this case the Goodman Gallery under Linda Givon), which, as argued earlier, has by and large been determined by white patronage. This patronage is one of the key factors Salah Hassan identifies as instrumental in providing important connections to the history of modern expression in contemporary African art along with other factors that have, according to him, played a consistent role in the way in which the history of modern expression has manifested in Africa following definitive Western standards (Hassan 1995: 30–33); I consider these factors as implicit in the South African context when it comes to the development of art produced by both 'rural' and urban black artists.

The first factor to consider is the upsurge of European and Western patronage and intervention in the art production and sale of black artists' works, which, Powell (1995) asserts, has had an impact on the work of both 'rural' and urban black artists and the way in which their work was promoted and sold in the art market. Placing this in a South African context, Powell recognises the disparities in the relations between white patronage and art making by black artists, which he argues has 'more or less systematically and historically forced black artists to remain in the condition of curio makers' (1995: 12).

But he also acknowledges that some 'rural' artists have managed to build substantial careers within the specific context of the 'art' world, artists such as Segogela and Noria Mabasa for example. Nevertheless in his view, the shaping influence of the white patron in relation to black artists — both 'rural' and urban — speaks profoundly about 'an implicit arrogation of the right to "advise" the producer of the art' (1995:12), which speaks volumes about white virtual monopoly of commercial South African contemporary art galleries today.

The second is the establishment of art schools and academies (Hassan 1995: 215) — often modelled on a Western educational system — and although not necessarily applicable to the case of these particular artists, most of whom were not formally trained, the development of such institutions has informed what became known as 'black art' in the broader South African art narrative in specific ways. As mentioned earlier, in the 1980s *Ditike* took a role similar to the commercial galleries and municipal and national art museums, in becoming an instrumental agent in providing support and marketing 'rural' artists, and thus deciding how and to whom their work would be marketed.[67] In his critique of *Ditike*, Gavin Younge describes it as 'a government-linked tourist stall' (1992: 63), which implies that the centre was in some ways perpetuating certain ideologies. However, Younge's own account of where the 'rural' artists feature in South African art history can also be implicated in the same critique he presents, given the manner in which these artists were represented in his publication titled *Art of the South African townships* (1988). Despite the often abstruse distinction between black 'rural' and black urban-based artists, the book misleadingly groups the two already problematic categories of 'transitional' and 'township' art into one category, painting a conflicting picture of what the publication was intended to portray.

Lastly, and perhaps more intrinsically linked to how an artist like Segogela was marketed for both local and international audiences, is the notion of a 'nationalistic cultural resurgence', which, following the example of many other African states post-independence, became a tool for propagating the sorts of nationalistic ideals that historian Annie Coombes argues were 'visual and material manifestations of new public histories' (2004: 1).[68] Coombes elaborates on such public histories through a theoretical framework that starts to speak to the work of an artist like Segogela, and the appearance of his work in other exhibitions that form part of this study. From then on his work appears in significant international exhibitions that portrayed particular ideas about South African art to a global audience, where terms such as 'diversity', 'nation building' and 'democracy' often defined the theme of the exhibitions and how the works were intended to be viewed and received.

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[67] See page 92

[68] In her seminal publication, *History after apartheid: visual culture and public memory in a democratic South Africa* (2004), Coombes discusses works by some of South Africa's most prominent contemporary artists dealing with ideas of a 'new' identity and a national public history.

## 4.4 Conclusion

In *The Neglected Tradition* catalogue, the categories of 'The New Generation' and 'New Generation Sculpture' are conveniently situated within the dialectic of town and countryside, a theme that runs through the catalogue in various ways. They both, however, allude to the politics of the time and this, as a result, makes them political terms themselves. They further explain why Sack in *The Neglected Tradition* intentionally avoids the use of terms such as 'township' and 'transitional'. While his category 'The New Generation' is centred on the role of art centres within urban areas, 'New Generation Sculpture' refers to artists from a particular locale — the northern part of the country (Gazankulu and Venda). Both groups of artists are not only framed within a particular time frame — the 1980s — but were also accommodated by the art market in distinct ways. 'The New Generation' is discussed in relation to the political changes that were taking place in the country, while the 'New Generation Sculpture' discussion seems concerned with the politics of the art market following the *Tributaries* exhibition of 1985 (Sack 1989: 27). In discussing these artists, Danilowitz says, Sack appears to take a 'standoff position, with a sense of distance rather drawing closer to this subject' (1990: 96), perhaps because of his awareness of the debates around the use of these terms.

Yet despite Sack's problematising the use of the term, he misses the opportunity to use the information provided by the *Tributaries* exhibition (which came before it) by choosing to focus narrowly on the theme of 'rural' versus 'urban' rather than exploring his own inquiry that questions the extent of cultural synthesis and the politics of terminology. This focus, Sack claims, afforded him as the exhibition curator and the catalogue author, the possibility of searching 'for an appropriate term that would come to grips with an approach to art that was distinctly different' (1989: 27).

In the same manner that Sack is critical of the distinction made between the 'fine artist' (that is, the artist who produces art with the gallery in mind) and the 'rural' artist (who in most instances makes work with a sense of the community in mind), a similar critique of his distinction between a category of 'ecclesiastical art' and the work made by the artists from Gazankulu and Venda can be made. As pointed out by Danilowitz, there is a danger in making such definitive distinctions as they

come across as cursory investigations that merely have to be repeated often enough before they are considered 'fact'(1990: 95). She cites the example of how the early work of Azaria Mbatha has often been assumed to be derived from a missionary influence, when the artist's own biographical notes show that this may not necessarily have been the case (1990: 95). This certainly resonates in the case of 'rural' artists; Sack himself acknowledges that they were likely to have been exposed and to a certain extent influenced by innumerable urban images, as many of them worked for white employers in the cities at some point. This holds true in the case of Nelson Mukhuba, Noria Mabasa, Jackson Hlungwani and Johannes Segogela, all of whom lived and worked in the city at some point, yet in many instances there appears to be little 'cognizance of an implicit cultural duality' (Sack 1989: 29) in the biographical accounts of these artists.

Although Sack heightened this sense of duality by his selection of works by these artists for the exhibition, he did not completely follow through with the complexities presented. Mabasa is represented by works in two distinct styles: her clay figures are generally linked to her ideas about her traditional origins but contemporary context — a juxtaposition of urban concerns rendered in a traditional material; while her wooden sculpture is associated with the spiritual realm or a form of fantasy often perceived to be free from any formalist concerns. A similar duality is traceable in the work of Johannes Maswanganyi, who created art for two different markets and contexts. Sack did not deliberate on this any further and reverts to the urban versus rural dynamic, following the notion that their work in general serves completely different purposes in white and African communities. His conclusion is left wanting in that it does not elaborate on what the possibilities of the 'creative rejuvenation' suggested in this duality could afford the development of South African art. Instead he compares the context of these artists with the art making conditions of the 1930s in terms of the interaction between two art forms, and avoids an elaboration of the socioeconomic processes that underlie such a relationship.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE THIRD CAPE TOWN TRIENNIAL (1988)

In this chapter I examine the ways in which the third *Cape Town Triennial* affected the acceptance and dissemination of 'rural' artists' works. I interrogate how the competition reflected nationalist ideas through its framing and scale. I address three contributing factors that I argue underpinned the formation of the competition and exhibition, and its status as a prestigious platform for both established and aspirant artists. These are i) the use of particular criteria in establishing what constitutes good art; ii) that the exhibition was constituted and defined as 'national'; and iii) the larger question of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the way the 'rural' artists were perceived and received into the mainstream.

Because it was framed as a competitive platform, inclusion in the *Cape Town Triennial* was a potential gateway into the market for younger artists, including those from the rural areas. Inclusion in the exhibition depended on an artist's making the 'cut' through a selection process in which works were chosen by appointed judges according to a particular set of criteria. The manner in which criteria are delineated for what constitutes a 'prizeworthy artwork' is always bound to be contentious as it raises broader questions, such as who decides what 'good' art is. This is significant because, in relation to the 'rural' artists, these criteria presented a disjuncture between how the artists saw themselves and how they were being perceived in the art world. This had particular implications for the 'rural' artists who had come to the notice of the art world in the 1980s, given the structure of South African society at the time. The fact that there were radical differences between black and white artists in terms of access to the competition, which became more pronounced for those black artists from rural contexts, meant that the possibility of a 'national' exhibition was somewhat problematic, because the playing fields were so divided and uneven. The attempt at redress also contributed towards the promotion of these artists according to the mobilisation of a particular narrative steered by the organisers and promoters. This narrative, I suggest, partly resulted from the organisers' attempting to secure South Africa's place in the international arena at the time.

My main concern in this chapter is therefore to explore the question of who was able to participate in this national exhibition and thus enter into a national history, given that the competition itself was grounded in exclusionary criteria. The

exclusionary factors created a scenario where, as argued by Terry King, 'exhibitions could be seen to signify patterns of cultural dominance' (1987: 39). In order to examine what these patterns might be it is necessary to place the exhibition in the context of a wider history, one that looks broadly at biennales in general and the formation of the *Cape Town Triennial* in particular.

Three 'rural' artists who participated in the competitive exhibition are discussed in relation to their entry and the reception of their works in the competition. Johannes Segogela, Noria Mabasa and Jackson Hlungwani were selected as finalists in the 1988 third *Cape Town Triennial* competition; however, despite this remarkable achievement, they seem to have fallen outside what King calls the 'promotional tone' of the exhibition, and, I will show, they were barely acknowledged for the merit of their work judged on its own in many of the written commentaries about the competition. There was a wide range of commentary around the exhibition, most of which focused narrowly on the controversy of that year, which centred on the perceived problem that the inclusion of certain artists in some way resulted in the exclusion of others. By their nature, competitions are bound to incite dissatisfaction in that they have to deal with the impossible task of trying to please a wide audience and are required to single out of 'winners' as in some way 'better' that the rest. This was, in the case of the *Cape Town Triennial*, further complicated by the presence of a sponsor.

It is therefore necessary to take a few steps back and consider some of the conditions that may have played a role in the establishment of the *Cape Town Triennial* competition and its prominence in the South African visual art landscape. The competition was inaugurated in a national institution, the South African National Gallery, one that subscribed to a range of practices entirely based on Western traditions. The tradition of art competitions and exhibitions has a long history in the West; for example, the Salon des Beaux Arts in France and the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy in Britain were prominent from the 18th century onwards. In the edited volume documenting the history of exhibitions and salons, editor Bruce Altshuler explains that

> any project that assembles material documenting a range of activity is bound to have a crucial and contentious selection process, which like the evaluation of art itself, is inflected by personal background and taste. (2008: 7)

Altshuler's history is a useful source for understanding the study of exhibitions, not only because it 'examines the historical presentation of art but also to explore a more nuanced perspective of current artistic and curatorial practices' (2008: 7). This is because the historical presentation of art has, as pointed out by Coombes, had implications for 'the display and classification of material culture from Africa in ethnographic collections in local and national museums as well as a variety of large-scale national and regional exhibitions' (1994:3).

Coombes' study centres on an analysis of 'the role of "spectacle" in the constituting of racial difference in relation to Africa' (1994: 3) and anthropological studies of the early 18th century, but it also looks at how colonial ideology forms an integral part of cultural institutions, particularly those inherited from British imperialism (1994: 3). It is important to note the formation of such an ideology as a preface for the discussion of the *Cape Town Triennial* because it provides a historical framework that explains why the competition is discussed in 'nationalistic' terms. This is because, in addition to the Triennial being held in major art centres, and supported by cultural institutions that had a particular (colonial) history, with that history came a particular view of art.

The first South African Art Academy Exhibition was held in 1920, followed by the establishment of the South African Institute of Art in 1926 and the National Art Convention held in 1932 in Cape Town. The South African Fine Arts Association, founded in 1850 and reconstituted as the South African Association of Arts in 1945, had been established with the aim of discussing 'proposals to erect a permanent structure in Government Gardens for the purpose of exhibiting art' (Berman, cited by Carman 2006: 21). Consisting of private collections from Thomas Butterworth Bayley and Joachim Nikolaus von Dessin, the exhibitions organised by the South African Fine Arts Association were, according to Carman, 'an interesting and important precursor of — sometimes co-runner with — public art collections in South Africa (Carman 2006: 20). The concept of the triennial, one could argue, stemmed from the same tradition, except that, by the 1980s, a number of institutions had been established in South Africa to house both private and public collections.

The *Cape Town Triennial* was staged in association with seven of these museums and galleries: the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, the William Humphreys Art Gallery in Kimberley, the King George VI Art Gallery in

Port Elizabeth, the Durban Art Museum, the Johannesburg Art Gallery, the Pretoria Art Museum, and the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg. Although only two of these were then national institutions (the South African National Gallery and the William Humphreys Art Gallery)[69], all had roles in South African society as primarily public forums for displaying art and hosting exhibitions. It is necessary to touch on the historical establishment of art museums and galleries in South Africa because, as noted by Anitra Nettleton, some of these 'have followed a particular agenda that is linked to colonial structures and ways of thinking' (1992: 1). These structures, I argue, were, in the case of the triennial, interlinked with the desire to construct a national identity through Western ideologies of art and culture. Nettleton argues that such ideologies are visible in the fact that 'certain kinds of museums play a significant role in the way we understand culture through the kinds of objects they collect and value' (1992: 1). Out of the seven institutions that form part of this discussion, five (King George VI Art Gallery, Durban Art Museum, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Pretoria Art Museum, and the Tatham Art Gallery) were run by municipalities and these seem to have followed a similar pattern in their assimilation of a Western tradition in the way they developed in South Africa's cultural landscape. They adhered to the notion of nationalism or 'South Africanism', that, as claimed by Joyce Ozynski, 'had always been a segregationist ideology' (1989: 278) based on racism and exclusions that were partisan not only 'in relation to the cultures it represented' (Nettleton 1992: 6) but also in terms of class. Both Nettleton and Ozynski note the complexities of class divisions in their discussions of the white working class during the early 1900s in South Africa, but, more importantly Ozynski notes how the formation of a national identity within these institutions explicitly 'did not embody the needs or aspirations of the black proletariat or peasant' (Ozynski 1989: 278).

The *Cape Town Triennial* was shown in institutions designated as places for high art and for much of their history these institutions were based on segregation policies that excluded everything that was not based on European traditions of art. The association of the Triennial with the high art institutions where it was held can therefore not be separated from the colonial past they share and the exclusionary

[69] At the time the South African National Gallery (SANG) and the William Humphreys Art Gallery were the only two national institutions that hosted the triennial. SANG is now part of the Iziko Museums of South Africa, which fall under the Department of Arts and Culture, while the William Humphreys Art Gallery has the department as its executive authority, which is appointed by the Minister of Arts and Culture.

policies integral to their structures. Furthermore, the quest for a national identity can be debated given that curators, who were primarily serving the small white minority, which wielded the political and economic power, moulded the identities of these institutions. Although most of these institutions grew from the private collections of individuals[70] who advocated for their establishment and/or donated collections of works, the role that subsequent curators played in shaping these institutions into the nationalist narrative is significant.

As with the establishment of JAG, most of these institutions were started at a time when the idea of a national identity in South Africa was beginning to emerge at the turn of the 20th century, the point at which a united state of South Africa was being carved out by the British colonial power. The Union of South Africa was formalised in 1910, prior to which it would have been impossible to talk about nationalism in these terms. Some settlers, for example Lady Phillips and her husband Sir Lionel Phillips, were part of what Nettleton refers to as European 'High' culture, which consisted of members from an affluent part of society who had an interest in art (Nettleton 1992: 2). Museums and galleries were thus associated with a particular class or social status but also a particular 'tradition of aesthetic production based on canons of Modern Western art and art training' (Nettleton 1992: 2). The idea of the *Cape Town Triennial* as a 'national' competition and exhibition, I argue, could never have been as neutral or as open as it set out to be and as it was portrayed in some written commentary. It was a competitive stage, and despite the impression it gave of being a platform where different expressions of visual art could be embraced, it proved to be the exclusive prerogative of the elite and privileged.

## 5.1 History of the *Cape Town Triennial*

The competition was initiated by the staff of the South African National Gallery and the regional branch of the South African Association of Arts in Cape Town,[71] and

[70] In the case of JAG it was through the efforts of Lady Phillips and with the Tatham Art Gallery it was through Mrs Ada Susan Tatham's instigation. The William Humphreys Art Gallery was set up after William Humphreys donated a substantial portion of his personal collection of 16th and 17th-century Dutch and Flemish Old Masters, British and French paintings, antique furniture and other objets d'art to the city. The Pretoria Art Museum came into being through the bequest by Lady Michaelis after her husband Sir Max Michaelis's death.

[71] Initially conceived as a biennale in 1979, the collaborative efforts of these two bodies eventually gave birth to the *Cape Town Triennial* upon securing sponsorship from the Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation.

their aim was to hold regular exhibitions that would 'incorporate the complete spectrum of South African visual art' (Michell 1989: 80). However, owing to constraints on funding from public sources, it ended up as a sponsored initiative funded by a private entity. The role of such private entities is important to the discussion of the 'national' status of arts competitions. Private sponsorship suggests that as the support for the competition was not received from national government, its claim as representative of art nationally could be problematic because it was not necessarily officially endorsed. Sponsored by the Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation, and exhibited in major art centres, the exhibition nevertheless had some 'national' exposure, drew sizeable audiences and received a fair amount of publicity and media coverage.

The first *Cape Town Triennial* was held in 1982. Its intention, as explained in the catalogue, was to bring together the best contemporary art being produced in the country, in a manner that would offer a 'fresh view' of what the more 'remarkable creative talents' were doing at that moment (Van Niekerk 1982: no pagination). It was, as noted by the organising committee chairman at the time, Raymond van Niekerk, 'a concept that grew out of the wish to bring together the best contemporary art being produced in our country' (1982: no pagination).[72] Although van Niekerk acknowledges the competition's shortcomings in reflecting a complete view of artistic achievement in the country, the result of which was a *selective* exhibition, he makes no reference to this, or to the effect on the broader picture of art in the country of the selection's exclusion of a large segment of black (urban) artists. The exclusion of black artists could not be put down to the lack of trained individuals, given the existence of formal training centres for black artists such as the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA) Academy, the Mofolo Art Centre and the Nyanga Arts Centre, all of which were established in the 1970s along with existing Fine Arts departments in the few universities that allowed black students. These exclusionary selection processes are accentuated by the fact that the first triennial took place in the same year as the 1982 *Culture and Resistance Symposium and Festival of the Arts* organised and

[72] The organising committee consisted of Jill Addleson, Esmé Berman, Clayton Holliday, Rosemary Holloway, Leo Kruger, Pat Senior and Albert Werth.

hosted by the MEDU Ensemble[73] in Gaborone, Botswana. It was one of the most important gatherings of South African and international cultural workers showcasing literature, poetry, film, theatre, dance, music and visual arts. It also signified the need to defy the separatist laws of apartheid and advocate for equality in South Africa's cultural landscape at the time. The existing inequalities against which the conference was organised were not taken into account in the first *Cape Town Triennial* competition in its selection of artists, and as noted by artist David Koloane[74], the Triennial disregarded the fact that 'visual art is a relatively specialised discipline which even amongst white populace is to a large extent dependent on educational qualifications, class and ambience of environment' (2003: 119). In other words, the nature of an art competition is already exclusionary as it is based on judging criteria[75] which, in South Africa, immediately disqualified most black artists.

For this reason a discussion on culture and national identity is inexorably linked to political and socioeconomic systems, and in South Africa this cannot be separated from the issue of race. Reflecting on the first Johannesburg Biennale, Koloane explains that 'in order to comprehend the background against which the biennale was staged, it is necessary to examine the socio-political implications' (1996: 54). The inclusion of MEDU in this discussion is thus a counter narrative, given that what this organisation was trying to achieve through artistic expression was happening at the same time as the emergence of institution-driven competitions like the Triennial. Both, it can be argued, were seeking to create a kind of 'national identity', except in the case of MEDU this was centred on a different set of principles from those of the competition — in particular its deployment of the idea of the collective versus the triennial's acknowledgement of the individual artist as genius; art for the community versus art celebrating the individual (prize reward); producing

[73] MEDU, a Sepedi word meaning 'roots', was set up by a group of cultural activists exiled in Gaborone, Botswana. Initially an organisation for black artists only, it was started as a cultural wing for the African National Congress. It consisted of various artistic units and conducted workshops aimed at training people in various art disciplines (Kellner & Gonzáles 2009: 76).

[74] David Koloane and Durant Sihlali were the first black practitioners to be part of the judging panel of the Cape Town Triennial. This did not mean they were 'collaborating' with the art world that organised the Triennial, which was at the time still excluding and patronising black artists. Their involvement in this instance should rather be seen as a shift in both the socio-political and cultural landscape, where the general attitudes of the art establishment were beginning to be open towards black art practitioners.

[75] The criteria of the competition itself were not out rightly stipulated in the exhibition catalogue, however it is important to note the chairman, Raymond van Niekerk remarks regarding the competition's previous history which he state 'it was clear that, despite the declared aims of its organisers, it had not been nationally representative'. (Van Niekerk 1988: 9)

art as a form of resistance versus producing art as affirmation of brilliance or exceptionality. These dualities are important to note as they are indicative of the precarious positioning of the so-called 'rural' artists who were later inserted into this divided narrative.

MEDU's role in South Africa was limited because it operated outside the country; however, its contribution to the debates around greater inclusivity, transformation, redress and democracy informed various facets of cultural production in South Africa. These objectives were not acknowledged on other platforms such as art competitions and some major exhibitions. The 1982 *Culture and Resistance Symposium and Festival of the Arts* conference initiated by the collective subsequently led to other significant conferences such as the *Cultural Voice of Resistance* (1982) and the *Culture for Another South Africa* (1987) conferences in Amsterdam (Kellner & González 2009: 156) and these events were, according to Dr Wally Serote (one of founding coordinators of MEDU), 'precursors for the formation of the Department of Arts and Culture' under a democratic dispensation' (Serote, 2009:193). The initiation of the 1982 Culture and Resistance Symposium was also momentous because it not only marked a period when culture became politicised as a form of resistance but it also provided a means for cultural workers to define their role and contribution to the development of society in general. MEDU had particular objectives, including providing arts training for South Africans and Batswana, and creating a hub for cultural activity and exchange where cultural workers could nurture a democratic culture. The ideological framework of the movement, as set out by Serote, was to unite South Africans through culture based on the notion that 'if culture was democratic and non-racial, it could be used as a weapon of the struggle and become entrenched in democratic spaces that would foster change and become an integral part of a democratic South Africa' (Serote 2009:194).

These ideals, I argue, were in direct conflict with the concept of the triennial, which was not only highly esteemed in the arts sector but also had great visibility in the media. The first *Cape Town Triennial* (1982) was promoted as a platform for discovering new talent and exposing it to a stagnant art scene that appeared to emulate European and American trends. It was also at this moment that the competition established its reputation as a showcase for contemporary art in South Africa, and thus sought to establish a South African contemporary art identity. However, this attempt

was not only misguided but also grossly misrepresentative, not only because some of the white artists who were included were internationally based, like Nils Burwitz and Gail Catlin, but also because the creative contribution made by black people as part of this cultural landscape was completely ignored. They were excluded from the nation under apartheid but also as artist David Koloane points out, 'the art fraternity never protested when their black colleagues were denied opportunities to share facilities such as libraries, art museums, through the Separate Amenities Act and other similar repressive legislation' (1998: 71), at least not until the MEDU ensemble initiated the *Culture and Resistance Symposium and Festival of the Arts* in 1982, the same year the first *Cape Town Triennial* took place. White artists, especially artists who were formally trained and had the privilege of tertiary education, thus not only dominated the competition and exhibition, but were also the top achievers. In the first competition Karel Nel won the first prize, followed by Annette Pretorius and John Clarke winning silver and bronze medals respectively. Davydd Myburgh, John Nowers and Ada van de Vijver received merit awards for their work (Van Niekerk 1982).

As noted by David Koloane, for most black students, 'enrolling into a tertiary institution for black students required that they seek the necessary permission from the government of the day' (1998: 70). Koloane argues the advantage of formal training obtained by white students provided them 'with multiple options and a variety of opportunities in careers within the art world' (1998: 70) and colonial influence had ensured that the standards used in art education were measured following Western models and aesthetic criteria (1998: 70). Black artists, however, were relegated to an inferior level of education enforced by the Bantu Education Act of 1955. Even with the establishment of art training centres like the Johannesburg Art Foundation in the 1970s, black artists faced the obstacle of transport to the city and the mandatory pass law — a form of internal passport that controlled black people's movement. The urban centres where many of the artistic activities took place were even further removed from those who lived and worked in the rural areas and as a result were largely attended by white audiences and housed works made by white artists. These aspects placed black artists at a disadvantage. Thus, as Koloane aptly points out, black artists were not only confronted with 'the difficulty of dealing with

aesthetic complexities as a secondary indulgence but also as something that was at times discouraged because it meant assimilating western influence' (1998: 70).

Raymond van Niekerk's assertion that 'the concept of the *Cape Town Triennial* grew out of the wish to bring together the best contemporary art produced in the country' (1982: preface), can thus be disputed because the result was demonstrably based on a narrow view of what was being produced. In the third *Cape Town Triennial* (1988) there also appeared to be an unequal representation. In this instance, however, it was in relation to the media used by the artists with only five sculptors with six sculptures[76] and one ceramist[77] accepted into the 81 finalists: all of these sculptors and ceramists were white males. The *Cape Town Triennial* competition thus not only embodied particular notions of what constituted contemporary South African art but also created a hierarchy between media, which appeared to favour some over others. There also appears to have been a dominance of neo abstract expressionist works[78] in the 1988 competition, which could be read as signalling South Africa's long isolation from the international art arena at the time. Some artists in South Africa, especially those linked with the Johannesburg Art Foundation and the Thapelo workshops, seemed to be exploring this approach long after the demise of abstract expressionisms began in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Europe and America[79]. The international arena, as defined in Euro-American terms, was, in the 1980s, moving from abstraction towards a preoccupation with the personal and political.

At the time of the second *Cape Town Triennial* in 1985, the competition selectors and judges seemed to engage more rigorously with the work submitted, as the catalogue included two additional contributions to the chairman's foreword — one

[76] Davydd Myburgh, *Untitled*, mixed media, h. 204; Uwe Pfaff, *Static development or rising nude figure singular*, wood, h. 114,5; Peter Schütz, *Untitled*, painted jelutong and pine, h. 160; Edoardo Villa, *Diagonal thrust*, painted steel, h. 115, Metamorphic figure in steel, painted steel, h. 97.5; Gavin Younge, *Furrow*, painted steel, h.144.

[77] John Nowers, *Star's farewell*, ceramic, h. 30,5, Animal shrine, ceramic, h. 37, 5.

[78] See Marion Arnold, *Duality*, oil on canvas, 100 x 130; Kevin Atkinson, *White African landscape*, acrylic on canvas, 280 x 300; Paul Emsley, *The inhabited* (diptych), acrylic on canvas, 157 x 157.

[79] Abstract Expressionism was an art movement prominent in the United States of America during the 1940s and 1950s. Its influence on the international art world was propagated and propelled by art critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Minimalism, Conceptual Art and Feminism began emerging, leading to the demise of the Abstract Expressionist movement. During this time Greenberg made a visit to a number of non-Western countries, including India, Singapore and Japan. In 1975 Greenberg visited South Africa following an invitation from Esmé Berman, then director of the Art Institute South Africa (Clement Greenberg Papers - 1928 -1995, Special Collections, Getty Research Institute).

from Alan Crump and the other from Deon Viljoen. There was also a lot more work submitted, creating the impression of greater inclusivity, although there were still no black artists present. Furthermore, the catalogue, unlike the previous one, was published in two languages, Afrikaans and English, suggesting that it was perhaps intended to reach a wider audience. In some ways van Niekerk's foreword seems to assert a nationalistic ideal, where he pronounces how the competition instilled a sense of pride and reward for all the work done by the organising committee – suggesting that the organising committee was representative of South African demographics. His statement not only praises the sponsors, without whom, he reiterates, the competition and exhibition would not have been possible, but also the auspices under which it was held. It is clear that conditions set by sponsorship loom over such competitions, as it is often in favour of goals that, as argued by Ivor Powell, influence public relations and public acceptability in particular ways (Powell, cited by King 1987: 51). Sponsorship also imposes a set of expectations that influences the selection process, and guides the overall impression of the competition.

## 5.2 The third *Cape Town Triennial*

In the tradition of the first two triennials, the third *Cape Town Triennial* opened at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town in September 1988, two months before *The Neglected Tradition* exhibition opened at JAG. The triennial later travelled to JAG from 8 March to 23 April 1989, two months after *The Neglected Tradition* was held. Like the previous two triennials, the third *Cape Town Triennial* claimed to be a national competition, in the sense that not only was it open to all artists living and working in South Africa, but also because it particularly sought to attract artists of a high calibre as representative of a national art, and thereby offered them a particular status and prestige in the Fine Arts realm (in addition to a cash prize).

The 1988 competition was overseen by an organising committee consisting of Raymund van Niekerk as chairman, Jill Addleson, Lorna Ferguson, Melanie Hillebrand, Rosemary Holloway, Leo Kruger, Dries Smit, Christopher Till and Albert Werth, as well as a selection panel consisting of the organising committee members and a central panel of appointed judges, which included Raymund van Niekerk, Alan Crump, David Koloane and Edoardo Villa. All were white, except for David Koloane. This detail is important as it not only gives a clear view of who was involved — a

consortium of curators (van Niekerk), academics (Crump) and artists (Crump, Koloane and Villa) — but also illustrates a racial composition reflective of the apartheid order that was still in place at the time.

Announcements and calls for submission of works were made nationally in local newspapers, where in that particular year, the increase in the prize money was foregrounded in order to attract more entries. Headlines such as 'Triennial prize increased' (The Star Tonight 1987:1), 'R15000 prize for top artist' (Van Rooyen 1987: 1), and 'Bumper Triennial prize' (The Cape Times 1987:5) were widely circulated in South African newspapers in a bid to entice more participation. That year the cash prize increased by R5000 and in addition the sponsors announced that merit prizes worth R1000 each would be awarded for the first time. The overall winner would also walk away with the 'prestigious Rembrandt Gold Medal' (Van Rooyen 1987: 1). These aspects made the competition not only an attractive and important art exhibition but also a symbol for stature and esteem in the South African art landscape. As noted by John Michell, participating became 'equivalent to being an Oscar nominee and just being there, up among the final few, is as good as winning' (1989: 80). Various writers further endorsed the Triennial's reputation in the public sphere. It also emerged from a long legacy of 'national' exhibitions mapped out in Esmé Berman's influential publication *Art & Artists of South Africa* (1983: 298). In fact, as noted by King, Berman had used selection into such a competition as a criterion (The Cape Times 1987: 5) for inclusion in her dictionaries of South African artists (1987: 41).

According to reports (Amusea News 1988: 2; Meijer 1988*a*: 1), the third *Cape Town Triennial* received some 893 entries out of which 85 works by 78 artists were selected for the exhibition. Entries were assembled at seven major centres where a preliminary selection was made by the panel, augmented at each centre by a fifth judge representing the region. The final selection and the adjudication of the Rembrandt Gold Medal and Merit Awards took place at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town. The four winners of the 1988 competition were Peter Schütz, Andries Botha, Keith Dietrich and Philippa Hobbs. Schütz walked away the overall winner and was awarded the main prize of the Rembrandt Gold Medal and R15 000 cash. Following its grand opening in Cape Town, the exhibition then toured South

Africa for a year, hosted by the major art centres previously listed[80]. These institutions were then afforded the opportunity to acquire some of the exhibition works for their collections.

It is significant that the triennial was a competition and even more so that it was funded by a private entity. However, its framing as a 'national' exhibition and the support it received from the institutions that hosted it warrant critique, because, as pointed out by Koloane, 'the nationalist government employed culture as a tool of racial discrimination and public institutions such as museums were conceived to reflect the cultural domination of one racial group' (1996: 54–55). As pointed out by Altshuler, museums have over the years, become increasingly important 'not only for their growing role in supporting and confirming contemporary artistic developments and placing them within an art historical narrative, but also for the creation of new display strategies' (Altshuler 2008: 11–15).

Such strategies of dominant narrative construction in the case of South Africa could be argued to have advanced the ideals of the nationalist government. Furthermore, some of the people on the organising committee of the triennial, particularly Ferguson and Till, held influential positions in some of the hosting institutions and were later instrumental in the establishment of larger international exhibitions, notably the 1995 Johannesburg Biennale. This does not necessarily mean that the Johannesburg biennales evolved from the triennial, but rather that they invoked similar issues which evolved from a socio-political condition that allowed certain individuals the authority to determine what would become constitutive of contemporary South African art. The views shared by both Koloane and Becker should therefore not be interpreted as a parochial reading of the Johannesburg biennale and its antecedents but rather as a synthesis of commentary that challenged the biennales as a legacy of the authoritarian imposition of what art in South Africa should constitute. The Johannesburg biennale was a project of the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council administered by Africus Institute for Contemporary Art (AICA), which meant it was state funded through municipal funds, but put out to tender to a private company under the direction of Christopher Till. As part of its realisation and obligation to serve and service the greater South African

[80] See pages 109 to 110

community it also meant that it set the tone of what was to follow in the new democracy.

Historically, biennales or triennials have always encouraged a form of exhibiting that evoked a sense of nationalism. The Venice Biennale as it stands is largely modelled around the representation of various nations with a few fringe projects sprinkled in between. The significance of such exhibitions in the late 19th century is historically important not only for the later contestations over national pavilions at biennales, but also because the ideologies that have shaped our understanding of modernism, of which biennales are a part, have, to a large extent determined its narration in art history. While the views expressed by anthologies like *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that made Art History, Volume I: 1863–1959* edited by Bruce Altshuler attribute the beginning of modern art to the break away from the Academy in the West, they also illustrate the gradual shift towards a more inclusive global overview. This shift, one could argue, has become more pronounced through the efforts of writers such as Sylvester Ogbechie and Rasheed Araeen, who confront and debunk claims to modernism in certain art-historical accounts using postcolonial discourse. Ogbechie's concern is that 'the canonical narrative of modern art as Western (and mostly male) has for too long been narrated as the universal history of modernity' (2007: 14), while Araeen[81] asserts that 'it is the reluctance to recognise what actually occurred, historically and epistemologically, that has led to the perpetuation of assumption by dominant Western culture' (2013: 238).

In spite of this awareness, however, the model of the exhibition and the biennale has by and large remained the same — that is, centred on Western conventions — an observation Koloane points out in his critique of the curatorial concept of the Johannesburg Biennale (1996: 55). Of course, exhibitions come out of a Western praxis and therefore this model of exhibiting is inevitably situated within this framework; however, Koloane was making this observation regarding some failures of the Biennale: that the curators made no effort at reinventing the curatorial praxis that came from the West in the staging of an 'African' biennale. Koloane does not offer any suggestions for how this could be done: he has, however, drawn our

[81] Araeen extends this to the South African context in an opinion piece titled *Save the Johannesburg Biennale/Sao Paulo and the Africans* for the online magazine *Artthrob.* In it he explains the issues with the biennale but also the impact it had on advancing the agenda of how Africa continues to feature in the western art canon .

attention to the fact that the least the curators could have done was to table some of these debates in the forums around the Biennale, hence his response that 'it is therefore surprising that in forums of this nature, intellectual concepts invariably become the obsession at the expense of practical solutions' (1996: 54).

Along with dealers, critics and collectors, all of whom play a contributory role in the system, exhibitions establish a historical narrative of which artists aspire to be part. They have become important as ideological representations of artistic progression and modes of artistic and economic empowerment, and should therefore be visually stimulating and offer the possibility to open new avenues for artists. However, in the South African context, as Koloane puts it, 'the balance is tilted in favour of the affluent sector of the population' (2003: 119). Koloane's view on the Biennale is important for two main reasons. The first is that his mapping of the lineage of the Johannesburg Biennale shows that it evolved from the traditions and relics of the *Cape Town Triennial*. One needs only to refer to the personnel involved in the organising committees of both exhibitions to make the connections. The fact that the fifth *Cape Town Triennial* never materialised is significant because it pointed towards a changing landscape: Koloane had been the first and only black judge of a *Cape Town Triennial* in 1988, yet by 1991 (which was its next iteration) South Africa was re-entering the international arena, a pursuit that was indicated by the exhibition's schedule for travel to neighbouring countries like Namibia.

Apart from a shift in politics, the 1980s was also an important period in South Africa's art-historical narrative because, despite the government's declaration of a countrywide state of emergency in 1986, and, the various restrictions and forms of censorship imposed by the government at the time, it was a period where, as described by Amelia Du Plessis, 'artistic expression was ambivalent, a renaissance of sorts where art making experienced an unprecedented upswing' (1991: 102). Writing on the appearance of certain publications, such as Sue Williamson's *Resistance art in South Africa* (1989) and Gavin Younge's *Art of the South African townships* (1988), Du Plessis's review not only provides a critical analysis of the role of literature on visual art but also observes how such literature contributed towards this 'euphoric activity' (1991: 102) in an opportunistic manner that fed off South Africa's political situation. This sense of opportunity, also pointed out by Koloane (1996: 56) in relation to the first Johannesburg Biennale, had to do with the fact that the arts community marked

both it and the Triennial as somewhat momentous events. However, King notes that although 'large-scale exhibitions such as the triennial contribute significantly to particular historical stances on South African art and play an important role in the formation of art history' (1987: 42), often this perception is based on particular interpretations of art. In the 1980s it became evident that this view was usually 'encouraged by readily saleable popular rhetoric that was usually one-sided' (Du Plessis 1991: 102). Similarly, the text produced about the Triennial in its (1982, 1985, 1988 and 1991) catalogues, until it was hit by the controversy of who was included and excluded, carried a one-sided tone, perhaps because it was intended to reach a wide spectrum of art-*interested,* as opposed to art-*educated,* local and foreign audiences.

There were further definitive events that marked the political shift that disseminated into the cultural sector at the dawn of democracy. In 1988 a conference on the conservation of culture was held in Cape Town, focusing on the theme of 'changing contexts and challenges' (Coombes 2004: 149). The conference was jointly organised by the South African Association of Museums, the National Monuments Council, the Department of Environmental, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Council, and the South African Society for Cultural History, and was described as a 'landmark' conference as it brought together interested professionals across the political spectrum under unusual circumstances (Coombes 2004: 15).[82] It was, Coombes argues, a crucial event, taking place at a formative period and at the same time raising issues concerning 'truth' and history, diversity or unity. With this in mind in her discussion, Coombes also offers careful analyses of the impact of South Africa's political legacy for the development of policy decisions in the museum sector (2004: 149).

Coombes aimed to expose some of the power struggles and debates within this conference over the main bodies responsible for policy in national institutions dealing with history and heritage. Part of the struggles, she observes, were over the significance placed on museums and other cultural heritage sites by what she describes as 'diminishing political powers' (2004: 17) and because such institutions

[82] Coombes examines the museological strategies adopted in a changing political landscape. The conference she is referring to was a fair achievement in itself through the cooperation of such organisations, and because earlier attempts at formulating strategies concerning reshaping policy with regards to culture and heritage issues had been hosted outside the country, in 1982 in Gaborone, Botswana and in 1987 in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

potentially provide some kind of ideological leverage. Coombes's premise is important in that she states that 'in a society where everything is so highly politicised, culture (including visual cultural statements) cannot be divorced from politics; *culture is in politics and politics in culture*' (2004: 151).

Yet despite nullifying the political implications of such a staging and the exhibition's framing as an art competition, the chairman Raymund van Niekerk's statement in the introduction to the catalogue alluded to the political overtones of the third *Cape Town Triennial*, particularly with regard to the challenges of a selection process within the competition. While his perspective primarily justified the decisions made, that is, in the appointing of judges, and the artworks and regions selected as part of the competition, he only timidly addressed other pressing matters pertaining to the controversy over this specific competition and exhibition, such as the role of the Rembrandt Van Rijn Art Foundation as the key sponsor[83], the idea of a 'collective cultural heritage', inclusivity, perceptions of 'aggressive forcefulness' and 'ego-mania' (Van Niekerk 1998: 10–12).

By the time the 4th and last Triennial opened in Cape Town in 1991, the competition was already anticipating 'the move towards constitutional changes in the country', with emphasis placed on works that reflected this consciousness. The winning works, as well as the merit award winners,[84] appear to convey this preoccupation in several ways. These works were politically charged in both subject matter and titling: they suggested a sense of anxiety and the tensions of a transforming political and social landscape. Nonetheless, the competition maintained its 'promotional tone' of prestige and controversy as it sought to reflect on the overall competition by rethinking and evaluating the discussion, comments and criticism of its predecessor (Till 1991: 5). Part of this rethinking was to also place emphasis on inclusion through an effort to ensure as wide a participation as possible. This is evident in the number of entries it received — something national competitions tend to boast about. In the catalogue the chairman, then director of the Johannesburg Art

[83] This is important to note because Anton Rupert, the chair and founder of the Rembrandt Van Rijn Art Foundation, was also a member of the Afrikaner Nationalist political, economic and cultural elite.

[84] William Kentridge was the overall winner that year with a drawing, *Sobriety, obesity and growing old* (1991) taken from his animation video. Sandra Kriel's tapestry *Why are you afraid*, Part I, II and III (1991) and Willie Bester's *Crossroads* (1991) received merit awards.

Gallery, Christopher Till, explains how the competition also made an effort to reach a larger rural population, stating that:

> The Triennial is an exhibition, which responds to contemporary developments and to the inclusion of a wide array of creativity. The emancipation of people and the investigation into cultural milieu from a perspective which acknowledges an African heritage, is part of the arena in which the *Cape Town Triennial* takes place. (1991: 6)

In his opening statement, Till invokes the idea of African heritage in relation to the inclusion of black artists and by extension the 'rural' artists in the Triennial. His involvement with *The Neglected Tradition* exhibition, which opened two months prior to the Triennial's arrival at JAG, suggests that Till was not only aware of the issues of redress but also cognisant of the role JAG could play in creating an impression of greater inclusivity as an institution through hosting these exhibitions. I thus argue that this way of thinking about inclusion highlights Coombes's discussion of the concept of 'community' in relation to museums, where she sees it invoked as 'a bureaucratic fiction strategically deployed to legitimate institutions and their projects' (2004: 4). For Coombes, efforts towards inclusion are often convoluted, with tensions that can be viewed as both

> genuine attempts to incorporate a more representative multicultural diversity as well as a slipshod way of dealing with more contradictory and challenging aspects of cultural and political diversity. (2004: 4)

The notion of diversity itself comes with some reservations, particularly in a society like South Africa where, as Coombes observes, it is often 'inconsistent with the ideals of those in whose name and interests it is invoked' (2004: 4). Koloane shared a similar sentiment in his observation of the inclusion of the community-based projects on the first and second Johannesburg Biennale that featured a diverse group of some unknown artists from the townships and rural areas. Many of these artists, he explains, were included under pretentious themes and terminology, intended to impress an international audience, while the artists themselves were oblivious to the meanings (1996: 53). Likewise, the inclusion of some black artists as well as the 'rural' artists on the Triennial was seen as 'making for a richer and more representative exhibition' (Korber 1988: 14), given the controversy of the previous Triennial (1985) where 'a

tremendous hoo-ha erupted because so few black artists were represented' (Michell 1989: 81).

## 5.3 Promotional tones: vehicles of publication and art history

The discussion that followed the opening of the third Triennial exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery raised many issues regarding the competition and amongst these there were those that resonated specifically with the inclusion of the 'rural' artists. These included the issue of the geography of the competition raised by Koloane, who pointed out that the focus on the urban centres not only demonstrated a recruitment disproportionate to that outside of these centres, but also reflected the segregated layout of South African society (Koloane cited by Berman 1989: no pagination). The glaring paucity of black artists' participation in the competition thus heightened the social and political meanings implicit in such a competition, something that was not anticipated by the organisers. Public collections' acquisition of work from those artists thus prioritised by such competitions not only meant that these institutions were constructing a particular identity for themselves but also that they formulated this identity on the basis of excluding the contribution of black artists, who were not competitors in the competitions. The other issue, which was raised by Nettleton and that does not appear to have been considered by the organisers, is that of the imposed criteria, which was problematic because these criteria were culturally biased (Nettleton cited by Berman 1989: no pagination). I examine the results of this in relation to these artists through the 'promotional tone' that King suggests is created by the exhibitions/competitions and the idea of cultural dominance implied therein.

Promotional tones are a form of commentary that King explains, were 'adopted for topical published criticism' (1987: 40) in relation to large-scale exhibitions such as the Triennial. The scale and reputation of the Triennial, he observed, not only afforded it this type of commentary but also ensured a form of contemporary critical writing that was 'intentionally judgemental and indeed an expectation of the vehicle of publication' for such exhibitions (1987: 40). Comments such as Marilyn Martin's 'The *Cape Town Triennial* is the finest show of contemporary South African art ever assembled' (Martins, cited by King 1987: 43) or Christopher Till's 'The *Cape Town Triennial* exhibition, the most important exhibition of South African art' (Till, cited by King 1987: 43), were therefore

indicative of the descriptive language used to foster an anticipated reception of the exhibition. Moreover, he observes, the commentaries not only 'reflect sets of reader expectations but also became part of a collection of sources that contribute to the production of historical knowledge' (1987: 40).

However, the tone was not always as grand and opulent as stated above; in fact, what differentiates the third *Cape Town Triennial* from all the others (1982, 1985 and 1991) is that the promotional tone was characterised by its response to, or anticipation of, controversy.

The general tone of the commentary regarding the Triennial was polemic, suggesting that the competition could have been serving certain interests. Some of the commentaries came across as partisan in that they drew attention to regionalism as opposed to the exclusionary factors that characterised the competition. Reporting on the outcomes of the competition, Marianne Meijer discontentedly speaks about the influence academics wield on art trends, yet her dissatisfaction seems to be based on the fact that there was a lack of KwaZulu-Natal artists represented in the exhibition despite two of the winners being from the region (1988*b*). In her short review, she also mentions the presence of the then director of the Tatham Art Gallery, Lorna Ferguson, who was also one of the panel members in the selection that year. Judging from Ferguson's 'Curator's Notes' (1986) regarding hosting the exhibition at the Tatham Art Gallery and Meijer's conclusion, it seemed the discontent with the Triennial was also a platform to table other frustrations with the lack of financial support.

These interests were intertwined in a complexity of social relations that, King suggests, are reflected by art exhibitions as part of the content of art-historical writing. His discussion is therefore not necessarily a survey of art criticism but rather points to some approaches to art-historical writing in the South African context that he says deal narrowly with the content of exhibitions (1987: 39, 45). The key conclusion to draw from King's argument, then, is that, given that exhibitions themselves are somewhat biased, and in this case based on particular ideas of interpretations of South African art, the Triennial can be argued to be part of a process of cultural distribution. The discussion of work it included can thus be expanded to include discussion on the reasons for those exhibiting artists having access to such processes, and, by extension, the reasons for limits to access (King 1987: 47).

## 5.4 The inclusion of the 'rural' artists

> There was a drive to reach more black artists for the 1988 Triennial. As you can see they are well represented in the current exhibition work of a very high standard. (Meintjies, cited in Michell 1989: 81)

This statement was made by the Public Relations Officer of JAG at the time, Julia Meintjies, in response to the lack of black artists in previous Triennials and their inclusion in the 1988 one. Her statement is significant because it revealed that although the third *Cape Town Triennial* carried the same kind of promotional tone as its predecessors — that of prestige and esteem — it remained troubled by a controversy that had begun long before. The controversy essentially stemmed from the exclusion of certain 'famous and highly esteemed' established artists, but also exposed a number of other issues regarding a dissatisfaction with the academies' control of South African art and lack of enough equal representation of black artists. In a newspaper report, Marianne Meijers draws a comparison between this controversy and the French *Salon des Refusés.* She draws this comparison between France's control of art by the *École des Beaux-Arts* and channelling official commissions by the *Académie des BeauxArts*, with the *Cape Town Triennial*, which was, in her view, 'South Africa's *Salon*, governed by influential academics on art trends' (1988: 7). Other reviews, like Merle Huntley's, anticipated the controversy, announcing that 'the *Cape Town Triennial* was in jeopardy because of dissension in the ranks of the South African art community, or that if it did take place, it would not

do so without drama' (1988: 3). Huntley gives a somewhat convoluted account, reporting on both the winners and those whose artwork was rejected. She quotes Guy du Toit (merit winner in the Volks Atelier Awards presented earlier that year), who raised some valid remarks regarding the subjective nature of judging an artwork, whilst at the same time referring to other artists who had expressed anger and indignation at the perceived bias of some judges (1988: 3).

Readings of the exclusion of certain artists, I argue, suggest two things. The first is that the controversy was triggered not only by questions around what constitutes a good piece of art, but also by the issue of the subjectivity of not only the judges but other viewers as well. The second reading is that because of the concerted effort to include more black artists, part of the dissatisfaction with the choice of artists alluded to the inclusion of 'rural' and untrained artists over the established 'household names'. The controversy about the competition was later publically discussed at a forum staged at JAG following the exhibition's opening there, where artists, academics, students, dealers and patrons expressed a range of opinions and views. On the panel to answer questions from the public were Professor Karin Skawran from UNISA, two of the Triennial judges (Professor Alan Crump from Wits and David Koloane from the Johannesburg Art Foundation), as well as journalist Ivor Powell and the chairman of the Watercolour Society of South Africa at the time, Laurie Vermont. The discussion presented an interesting paradox in that, on the one hand some critics accused the competition of being too political, while on the other, there were those who felt it was not political enough. By the same token others felt the competition was too elitist or not sufficiently selective. Some expressed disappointment in personal taste, while others, like Professor Alan Crump raised some valid points questioning the validity of art in society at large and the role of sponsorship when it comes to accolades and public recognition (Crump, cited by Berman 1989). The debate also sparked other issues that may not have been obvious in the initial conversations — such as that of the inclusion of certain artists at the expense of others — which appeared incongruous given that this competition was the first to incorporate 'rural' art and artists and would have been less controversial by the time the Johannesburg Biennale became a reality. Another aspect the debate revealed was that certain sectors of the arts community viewed the Triennial as 'actively endorsing the apartheid system' (Berman 1989: no pagination). A more insidious endorsement

and perpetuation of this, as reported by Berman, was highlighted by Anitra Nettleton who pointed out the 'anomalies inherent in the definitions of fine art as practice' (Nettleton, cited by Berman 1989: no pagination). By questioning the place of 'rural' art and artists in the competition, Berman suggests, Nettleton draws our attention to how the competition was not only 'imposing criteria and a standard for what art is in South Africa' but also highlighting the notion of "aesthetic excellence"' (Nettleton, cited by Berman 1989: no pagination).

Terry King's discussion of the ways in which such exhibitions signify cultural dominance picks up on this, although he makes no mention of these artists or the issue of their inclusion/exclusion, perhaps because it was not of concern then. Nonetheless, he raises important points on the ramifications of a selection process in a major national competition. Selecting is, for him, 'a sifting process', which inevitably determines the response and extent of coverage of any curated exhibition. This is, in his view,

> part of a consolidation of records conveniently amalgamated to foster the history of an artwork into a 'manageable package' suited for incorporation into history and other fragments of knowledge. (King 1987: 41)

In some cases, he observes, this package is used as a gauge for inclusion into publications, some of which have played an important role in the development of art history and have left a lasting impression in the art-historical narrative (1987: 41). The acceptance of Johannes Segogela, Noria Mabasa and Jackson Hlungwani into the competition, and their public reception, similarly suggests their incorporation into a new art market as a package that framed their art in a particular way. Van Niekerk's curatorial statement for 1988 appears to defend the selection decisions made by the judges rather than defining what these choices meant for the competition in terms of its character and stature in South Africa's cultural landscape. The response to his statement resulted in the competition attracting further scrutiny in the public arena, with questions around its selection process, choice of judges, their occupations and even suspected regional loyalties and bias. In the end the curatorial statement did little to address the core of the controversy. Instead, it glossed over the issues presented by referring back to the birth of the competition and detailing the struggles and achievements of the Triennial since its inception.

As reported by Rose Korber, the third *Cape Town Triennial* featured 'a new generation of artists who had almost become household names' (1988: 14). These included William Kentridge, Penny Siopis, Peter Schütz, Karel Nel, Marion Arnold, David Brown, Malcolm Payne and Clive van der Berg. Furthermore, she notes, the exhibition was made richer and more representative by the inclusion of black artists not shown at previous Triennials, such as Noria Mabasa, Sfiso Mkame, Tommy Motswai, Bonnie Ntshalintshali, Derrick Nxumalo, Johannes Mashego Segogela, Helen Sebidi, Jackson Hlungwani and Tito Zungu (1988: 14).

Hlungwani, Mabasa and Segogela were selected as finalists in the competition. The work by Segogela selected for show was *Visitor from the USA* (Fig. 26). Resembling a miniature stage set, it consists of a configuration of five small figures seated at a table in what resembles a living room with a door, and an American visitor standing at the entrance. The five figures are drinking tea, an occasion that would most probably explain the arrival and welcoming of the visitor, although he is placed as outsider. Nonetheless, it is a welcoming scene, inviting the viewer as the second visitor to the occasion by eliminating the walls of the room, metaphorically suggesting an invitation through an inclusion of a door. By 1988 Segogela had already been featured in a number of exhibitions at the Goodman Gallery, a commercial gallery that provided him with financial and artistic support. It is possible that the gallery could have guided his entry into the competition. As noted by Nettleton (cited by Berman 1989: no pagination), the 'rural' artists who were entered into the competition did not necessarily think of themselves as artists, at least not in the sense that was implied by the competition.[85]

### 5.4.1 Noria Mabasa

Mabasa's entry for the competition was *Natal Flood Disaster* (Fig. 32), an impressive sculptural piece consisting of a combination of human and animal forms. It displays a chaotic scene of the destructive Natal floods of 1987 and unlike Mabasa's clay work that was usually more realistic, it is a complex piece both in composition and content. The work was later renamed *Carnage II*, probably not by Mabasa because most of the 'rural' artists are not literate in English, and was extensively discussed in newspaper reviews (Nettleton 2000: 32). This is significant because part of what made the work

[85] See page 125.

exceptional was its technical excellence based on the criteria stipulated by the competition; however, it seems as if most writers were unsure of how to write about it because it could not be labelled as 'craft' — a categorisation usually associated with 'rural' artists. Its sensitivity to material and form demonstrated the same kind of sensibilities that Western modernist sculptors like Henry Moore and Auguste Rodin showed to their material. This could also explain why some of the other 'rural' artists did not make it into the competition, because their work did not fit neatly into Western art conventions. In a sense Mabasa's acceptance into the competition reaffirmed the observation Sharlene Khan makes regarding the premise of African art in large-scale exhibitions in general, 'that it either encompasses or dispels the prevailing stereotypical notions that feed into the western expectation of what constitutes African art' (2007: 51).

In some ways Mabasa's entry completely dispelled this stereotype of art made in certain African contexts as 'primitive' in both its subject matter and approach, yet in many of the texts in which it appeared, it was consistently framed around a prevailing mysticism where her work is informed foremost by her dreams. While this may hold true of her approach, I argue, the work itself could benefit from further exploration beyond these definitions.

Mabasa was the second youngest artist in the rural-based group and the only woman, who, in achieving her success, followed a slightly different path from her contemporaries, although her biography is as much a part of the same narrative as all the other rural artists' biographies are. Born in 1938 in Xigalo in Venda, Mabasa still lives and works in Vuwani, Venda. Like Maswanganyi, her story stems from the *Tributaries* exhibition in 1985 and from then on she appears in the same kinds of exhibitions under the same rubric of 'transitional' artists. Similarly, her life and career more or less navigated between the rural and urban. Having lived in White City, Soweto in the early 1950s, she returned to Venda where she still practises today. Initially Mabasa began working in clay, making figures that represented traditional themes like the *domba* initiation, and it was only in the early 1980s that she began working in wood.

Nettleton suggests that Mabasa stands out among artists from Limpopo as one spoken for and about, something, which tends to perpetuate a 'primitive African mystique in relation to her work' (1995*b*: 34). Nettleton suggests that artists like

Mabasa were not always aware of how their work was being marketed, especially by gallerists, who at times attached political meaning to her work when she had not originally intended it as such. This, however, does not mean that Mabasa was not politically aware of her surroundings, as is sometimes implied by outsiders who at the time perceived Venda 'as the land of the innocents where an authentic black culture reigned' (Solomon 1994: 1). It is indirectly suggested in writings about Mabasa that she remained silent in the commentary about her work, as it was predominately described following a specific narrative centred on a premonition from her ancestors. Although Mabasa confirms this on numerous occasions, stating 'I can do this because I dream wood' (Mabasa cited by Lakha-Singh 2001: no pagination) and 'I started carving in 1974 and all my work comes from my dreams' (Mabasa cited by Adams 2002: no pagination), it is works like those produced for her first solo show at the Goodman Gallery, titled *Parade*, that confirm her placement in a kind of mythical tenet that surrounds rural artists in the South African art-historical narrative. It is mythical in that any reference to this exhibition tends to exclude Mabasa's voice and intention in making these figures, which were instead imbued with a political meaning that she did not necessarily intend. Her silence, as Nettleton notes, 'encourages the perpetuation of a "primitive" African mystique in relation to her work'. (2000: 34). In addition, Kathy Berman, describes this oeuvre as highly idiosyncratic and ironic, and further insinuates that this work was not as percipient as the wooden works informed by dreams (1987: 20).

Prior to the *Tributaries* exhibition Mabasa exhibited along with other Venda-based artists at the Venda Sun hotel. Her painted clay sculpture *Portrait of President Mphephu of Venda* (Fig. 18) was later featured in *Tributaries* and, contrary to certain commentary, such as that of Younge, which suggests that this type of work was driven by a growing, primarily white market (1988: 39), it carried as much agency as *Carnage II* (Fig. 32), which received far more accolades in the 'Fine Art' realm for its technical merit. Younge intimates that artists like Mabasa provided client-driven sculptural images that were of cultural ceremonies but were not necessarily for ceremonial purposes. He further points out how this mode of production can only fall under tourist art, as it is entirely a western construct and client driven regardless of material culture passed on through oral tradition (1992: 69). However, it is important to note that Mabasa was influenced by numerous factors and people at different

junctures in her life, including Nelson Mukhuba, who played a major role in her inclination towards wood as a medium.

In 1987 Mabasa was amongst a group of 'rural' artists selected for the Vita Art Now exhibition, as well as a show titled *Figurative Ceramics and Decorative Textiles* held at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town. She was also one of a group of artists included in a sculpture show titled *VhaVenda* at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival in the same year. In 1988 she was one of three rural artists selected for the third *Cape Town Triennial*, which, despite its controversy, may have contributed towards her recognition as a wood sculptor. Customarily woodcarving was seen as an activity undertaken by men, particularly in Venda and Tsonga tradition; Mabasa's inclusion not only distinguished her as a cultural exception, but also foregrounded her technical command of the medium. Yet, as Karen Harber observes, only a small number of readings of her work 'acknowledge her changing position as a woman in Venda society' (1990: 60). Although in this instance Harber deals purely with Mabasa's clay oeuvre, she makes some insightful appraisals of Mabasa's practice in relation to representation, social context and construction of gender roles. Harber's paper not only acknowledges Mabasa's images as ideological and matriarchal, but also notes how she has had to overcome gender and class limitations within her own community, often working in difficult conditions. Harber also reveals how Mabasa has managed to 'construct and redefine a new reality that she claims has acquired its own meaning and ideological resonance beyond her time and place' (1990: 57).

A number of critics have argued that black artists are often critiqued from a biographical point of view, which in many ways detracts from the work they create. Although this is the case with regard to almost all the artists this study will examine, it should not detract from exploring the possibility of other narratives that could form part of these biographies. The histories of artists like Mabasa are embedded in written commentary in particular ways and, despite international acclaim of their work, the artists consistently continue to be referenced in relation to their backgrounds, experiences and beliefs, as though these are the only factors informing their practice. A work like *Carnage II*, for example, is possibly one of Mabasa's best-known wooden pieces, and has received extensive coverage in written commentary since its appearance in *The Neglected Tradition* exhibition in 1989, yet even in its technical

and allegorical splendour, there is a mysticism around Mabasa's biography that takes precedence over any critical analysis of her work. In 2003 an article in the *Sunday Times* featured a substantial spread on Mabasa's *Carnage II* and Dr Phutuma Seoka's *Gorilla*. Despite the image of the work being the focal point of the article, only a tentative description of the work is offered, preceded by an explanation of how 'she sculpts with a mystic eye inviting one to explore the spiritual side of life' (Sunday Times: Metro 2003: 15).

The sculpture of the 1980s formed part of the South African pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1993 and is owned by JAG. Much like Maswanganyi's inclusion in *The Neglected Tradition*, the insertion of these two works (*Carnage II* and *Clergyman*) in the same exhibition appears to be intended to demonstrate polarities in Mabasa's work — wood versus painted clay, modern versus traditional, and Western versus African themes. *Clergyman* (Fig. 33) is a small clay figure of a black man dressed in a black robe and holding a Bible. Contrary to *Carnage II,* on one level it refers to the influences of Christianity on African people, yet on another it displays Mabasa's awareness of the ideological positioning of gender, race and representation in that it refers to conditions of patriarchy that permeate even black communities.

By the early 1990s Mabasa's had begun to thrive, as she was featured in more exhibitions, including international shows, most notably *Art from South Africa* (1995) held at the Museum of Modern Art in the United Kingdom. During this time her work also appeared in numerous ceramic shows like *Contemporary South African Ceramics* (1992) held at the Tatham Art Gallery and *Emhlabeni: From the Earth – Pottery and clay from South Africa* (1993) held at the Standard Bank Gallery. Ironically this was also a period when *Ditike* began to decline as a marketing outlet for rural artists and their visibility in metropolitan centres started to diminish (Duncan 1994: 8). But unlike other artists with less established standings, and those living in areas that were not brought into the spotlight, Mabasa seemed to have a budding career with inclusions in important institutional collections and commercial galleries. In 1991 *Town and Country* opened at the Everard Read Gallery and featured sculptures from a number of rural artists, including Mabasa. This was subsequently followed by an ongoing exhibition of works in the Read Contemporary's sculpture garden in 1992 and 1993. Read Contemporary became a new agent for these artists, exhibiting and selling their works to both local and international buyers. A large number of works, as

revealed by Duncan in an interview with Trent Read, was taken on consignment due to factors like distance and suspicion on the artists' part that they would not receive payment for works sold. Read thus accumulated a substantial number of unsold sculptures, many of which are still in his ownership today (Duncan 1994: 83).

Following the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994, Mabasa became less visible, appearing occasionally in group shows mainly centred on themes of democracy, nation building and a transforming political order, such as *Siyawela: Love, Loss and Liberty in South African Art* (1995). Her work reappears again more prominently in written commentary in the early 2000s pending a commission by the state in commemoration of the 1956 women's protest march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria. During this time Mabasa's work became recognised nationally with an acknowledgement from the Department of Arts and Culture — who announced a plan to 'redefine her working space by building an open air gallery' (Muthambi 2002: no pagination) for her work — followed by the Order of the Baobab in Silver awarded by the presidency in 2002 and the Mapungubwe National Order awarded to her by former President Thabo Mbeki in 2010. Steven Sack notes how, following these accolades, Mabasa not only become suspicious of art dealers and curators interested in her work but also no longer needed the art market[86] because she was primarily supported by the state.

In a discussion of another artist whose work defies categorisation, Koloane notes that despite some artists' work defying myth and the perpetual expectation to stand for the great African mythology, art critics and the manner in which they write about the artists and the work often bolster these ideas through their writing (1998: 71). An artist such as Mabasa has a unique repertoire that includes clay figures and wood sculptures. Her work is therefore not always about the spiritual and mythical, as it is for the most part portrayed in written commentary, but also involves an intuitive response to the medium, texture and subject matter. While her wooden sculptures are a complete contrast to her clay figures, both illustrate her intuitive response to social and political issues.

The work Jackson Hlungwani entered for the third *Cape Town Triennial* is titled *Khoti (vulture)* (Fig. 34). There is a sense that the work may have been made specifically for the competition because of the way it was sculpted in comparison to

[86] Steven Sack, Interview: 2013.

his usual repertoire. Unlike some of his other works that depict animals like fish, which are free floating, this piece was sculpted with a base so that it stood like a statue. Most of Hlungwani's works, particularly those of animals, had plinths attached as an afterthought as they were not designed for display in a gallery environment. This sculpture also has an odd finish with streaks carved to resemble the feathers of the bird while the tail looks as though it was chopped off, an approach that is not typical of Hlungwani, because often the piece of wood influences and in most cases accentuates the form of the sculpture (Nettleton 1989). It is also a small entry, considering the range of works that were entered, but perhaps given that a retrospective of his work was held a year later, his most significant works may have been reserved for this purpose.

All three works accepted into the competition are sculptures made from wood, which seemed appropriate as the competition was dominated by sculptural works that year. However, despite the varying subject matter and content informing the works by Segogela, Mabasa and Hlungwani, the three were somehow grouped collectively as one category in the media reports, based on their context and background rather than their technical ability or subject matter. The language and vocabulary used to describe these artists' works placed more emphasis on visual descriptions rather than pursuing a more critical engagement with the work — its formal elements, composition, contextual framework and what may have inspired the artists. As noted by Koloane, reviews on black artists often 'contain an implicit concern as opposed to being decidedly affirmative' (1996: 55) and although Koloane is referring to a particular example of one artist's review, his observation encompasses a contemporary syndrome of some writers' (particularly white writers) inability to move beyond descriptive articulations of black artists' works. Gule makes a similar observation in relation to a review of the work of Nicholas Hlobo, where he cites Goniwe and his point on the kinds of patronising attitudes displayed by this type of writing that in most instances detracts from an engagement with the work. It seems, as with the work of the 'rural' artists, 'when it comes to discussing the works of black artists critics tend to use the artist's biography as a primary point of departure, often to the detriment of the work itself' (Goniwe, cited by Gule 2013: no pagination). The 'vehicles of publication' of such written evaluations contain implied comparative judgements in that the views of certain critics are articulated more than others, a

pattern King notes has been employed in critical writing on competitive exhibitions since the emergence of salons in the 19th century (1987: 43).

Of all the published commentaries on the exhibition, only Ivor Powell and Kathy Berman delved into the political underpinnings implicit in the choices made by the judges, presenting more critical analyses of the range of artworks included in the exhibition. Berman acknowledged the entry of Mabasa and Hlungwani into the Fine Art stream and praised the level of maturity and talent in their work. But she also had strong views on the competition itself, pointing out that, whereas previous Triennials included more protest voices, the political constraints of the late 1980s had muted the 3rd Triennial's 'shrill and explosive edge' (1988: 1). Her view is that the third *Cape Town Triennial* was not as exuberant as the previous two; it seemed to her to have 'aged prematurely into a sombre quiescent state' (1988: 1). She also speaks about how a competition like the Triennial could lead to artists' feeling compelled to make the ultimate South African statement' (1988: 5). These, she warns, become 'distorted exercises in megalomania and in less extreme cases, self-important technical masterpieces in the grand old Salon tradition' (1988: 5). Even worse, she explains that some work came across as 'opportunistic in seeking credibility through blatant political and literal titles' (1988: 5).

Barry Ronge assumed a similar tone of disapproval in what he called a 'numbing sameness' in the works on the show (1989: no pagination). This he attributed to sponsorship and explains how sponsored art competitions have the potential to drive art to a dead end. He argued that sponsorship tends to reinforce a sense of sameness in that it tends to be the same group of academics and museum directors who are involved in the judging of such competitions, which ultimately leads to the same artists winning repeatedly. The inclusion of 'rural' artists, Ronge notes, was a challenge to the old pillars of the establishment, and he states that 'artists who were previously condescendingly ignored under the label of "tribal craftsmen" found their place' (1989: no pagination), but he also notes Nettleton's observations that the prominence of such competitions has led to these 'artists abandoning their traditional, vital creations to make sculptures that will fit a competition panel's requirements' (Nettleton, cited by Ronge 1989: no pagination).

However, it is Koloane's views on the inclusion of these artists into the mainstream that are most significant for future development. Although he made these

observations in the context of the (later) Johannesburg Biennale, his statement speaks volumes about the underlying perceptions that constituted the inclusion of these artists in the Triennial. Speaking on the sudden interest in contemporary art from Africa, Koloane points out that not so long ago 'contemporary African expression was virtually non-existent within the aesthetic frame of reference of Western discourse' (1996: 5). The sudden interest in the 'rural' artists by curators thus evoked 'an attitude closer to the European ideal based on the African myth — the thatched roof hut, wood smoke, and effluvium of cow dung' (1996: 55).

It is in this sentiment of tokenism, I suggest, that the three 'rural' artists were framed within the competition, and included alongside their urban counterparts.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Entering the exhibition out of tokenism as opposed to being judged on merit had some implications for the 'rural' artists because it limited their status as artists and as equal participants in the competition. The competition organisers displayed a myopic attitude towards the artists' creative output because it should have been an opportunity to embrace all kinds of artistic expressions so as to give a more inclusive and better reflection of contemporary art in the country. The larger inquiry posed by the inclusion of these artists is to question the nature of contemporary South African art and who at the time was included within this rubric. In other words, how does art that does not fit neatly into these definitions of 'Fine Art' become classified, and on what criteria is this definition based, given that competitions often claim to create an equal platform for all kinds of work to be judged? The criteria of the competition were thus questionable given the ambiguous status of these artists as 'fine artists' the moment they were accepted into the competition (Nettleton, cited by Berman 1989). As noted by Nettleton, these artists may not have been aware of the implications of being labelled an 'artist'; however, it would be an assumption to think that they were not aware that what they were making was creative. The deciding questions are therefore, what becomes labelled as 'art', and, more importantly, who decides what falls into these criteria?

The fourth and last *Cape Town Triennial* was held in 1991and it was clear that the country was moving towards constitutional changes. It was also clear that the previous 1988 competition had had a significant impact on how the 1991 *Cape Town*

*Triennial* was reconceptualised and how it was critically re-evaluated (Till 1991: 5). The organisers this time took a more transparent approach by including a report back from the regional panels in the catalogue. These reports were sourced from all seven regions, and served as some kind of explanation of the selection and judging process. In addition to a list of all the finalists and images of their works, the catalogue also included an essay by Elza Miles titled 'Land of Storms and Good Hope' (1991). Miles begins her essay with a discussion involving an analogy about two artworks about children to give an overview of the overall work selected for the exhibition and how it places the Triennial in a historical context (1991: 27). She creates a contrast between the artworks to highlight the political and racial inequality that permeates South African society but also within the subject matter of the work itself. As suggested by the title, her account is a 'comparative reading of different accents that originate in a torn society' (Miles 1991: 27), but one that also follows a particular narrative in the way the artworks are discussed. She gives a descriptive analysis of each of the works, but there is also a strong emphasis on the contrasts between the works, which illustrates the kinds of dualities artists were working within at the time.

What is important to note about this particular Triennial is that the 'rural' artists that appeared in the 1988 Triennial (Hlungwani, Mabasa and Segogela) were not featured. Instead there seemed to be a focus on a new generation of artists with similar aesthetics and a similar command of woodcarving, which for various reasons can not necessarily be labelled as 'rural'. These included sculptural works such as Gazland Hlungwani's (Jackson Hlungwani's son) *Dancing man* (Fig. 36), Goldwin Ndou's *Crocodile eating flamingo* (Fig. 37) and Owen Ndou's *Hunter with mountain snake* (Fig. 38).

The presence of these artists in this last Triennial may have paved the way for the inclusion of the 'rural' artists in the Johannesburg Biennale. However, this inclusion further emphasised their precariousness within the contemporary art world. The incongruity of their inclusion in an art competition of whose judging criteria they were unaware, is thrown into perspective by Koloane's assessment of the position of art criticism in South Africa. As he points out, 'art discourse is and has always been the prerogative of the privileged white community whose education system has been designed according to western standards' (1998: 69).

The contemporary art space is therefore affected by economic systems that influence the production of contemporary art. Like the first Johannesburg Biennale, the third *Cape Town Triennial* was not only a missed opportunity to challenge the elitism of contemporary art spaces, but also, in the end, was to the detriment of these artists and the way their work was viewed.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The exhibitions of the 1980s shaped the decade that followed in various ways that have become significant to where South African art and its history are positioned today. The early 1990s was the dawn of democracy in South Africa and because of the political and social changes that were taking place it is important to conclude by taking a critical perspective on the exhibitions so as to see how they influenced the writing of South African art history and what the consequences of that have been. The narrative of the 'rural' artists alone presents a unique perspective, both in relation to the individual trajectory of each of the artists I have discussed and to how certain art forms and artists were being received in the art world and featured in the discourse of African art at the time. Although this was not the primary focus of this study, the exhibitions discussed are at times placed in the context of the last gasps of formalist primitivism, which coincides with this type of art's entry into the cultural landscape. While emphasis was placed on the modernity of the works of 'rural' artists, there was an equal emphasis placed on their perceived primitivism.

My discussion of the exhibitions is treated as a moment of interpretation, one that is informed by the socio-political conditions of a changing society, and so it was important to think of them in this sense as opposed to hermetically sealed moments in history. As a result I attempted to establish where 'rural' art was positioned in the broader discussion of South African and African art history, by looking at the biographies of the 'rural' artists — how they were discussed and written into art history. Tracking the discussions through these exhibitions of the 'rural' artists in this African art framework of renaming and re-categorisation has highlighted various challenges to art history and its canons. The discussion of 'exhibitions as art history' highlighted the impact of international exhibitions like *Primitivism* and *Magiciens de la Terre*, because of the debates they raised around African art in relation to Western frameworks that were imposed by these exhibitions on the discourse. The issues I discussed are thus related to some of the power struggles around categorisation and representation, and how these played out in the context of the exhibitions.

In the South African context these power struggles had greater implications for the 'rural' artists who were suddenly incorporated into the art market than for those who were more established in the urban context. As argued in an earlier chapter,

the *Tributaries* exhibition was key to this first introduction because it brought together a variety of artistic expressions under one rubric — that of sameness. But at the same time it accentuated a sense of difference in the dialogue it created between works that were not necessarily viewed as art at the time, alongside those rooted in Western modes of art making. This, as explained by the curator Ricky Burnett, was because he decided to cast a wider net that, although criticised for being too self-conscious, in his view this reach of a larger audience showed in the empirical results of the exhibition. The exhibition, he claimed thus 'displayed a "seamless" narrative between a diversity of works while still maintaining the integrity of each work'.[87] There is no comprehensive archive of the exhibition itself because most of Burnett's records were stolen upon his arrival in Seattle when he and his wife emigrated to the United States.[88] As a result, the traces of the exhibition and how it was documented rely on secondary sources, such as the catalogue, and on other materials such as newspaper articles and some references in academic papers.

The discussion of the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition is meant to highlight the similarities the two exhibitions shared in the structure they adopted in representing artists described as non-Western alongside those centred in Western art practices. It has been claimed that *Magiciens de la Terre*, in particular, constructed assumptions about the relationship between certain artists and the dominant (Western) art market. I argue that the same can be claimed in relation to the *Tributaries* exhibition and the narrative it constructed around the 'rural' artists. An example of this is the assumptions it created around Johannes Segogela, whose work it was assumed had featured in the exhibition. This assumption not only suggests that Segogela was part of the group of artists 'discovered' by Ricky Burnett but also illustrates how art from this part of this country was being framed and discussed in the broader art landscape. Segogela, like other artists such as Johannes Maswanganyi, was and is still, to a certain extent, an entrepreneur. He works from the back yard of his home in Sekhukhune where he also keeps a herd of sheep and a few banana and peach trees. His studio space is beneath a tree and consists of a table with a clamp and three cement blocks that he says ensures all his sculptures stand upright. Since he was first introduced to the art market through the Goodman Gallery, Segogela has had a fairly

[87] Burnett, Interview, 30 May 2012.

[88] Burnett, Interview, 30 May 2012.

successful career, albeit one documented only sporadically as part of other large-scale exhibitions of South African art.

The duality between the rural and the urban was to be the main selection framework for *The Neglected Tradition* exhibition, but it fell short in deciding where the 'rural' artists would feature in the larger narrative of South African art. In an interview reflecting on the exhibition, curator Steven Sack maintains that for him

> the biggest challenge with this work was that when experienced in context, it made perfect sense, but as soon as it was moved into the gallery environment in an urban context it became difficult to comprehend and not very appealing.[89]

The reasons for the demise of the work of the 'rural' artists in the art market, he explains, were that not only did it present a difficult proposition for art consumers in being presented and sold out of context, but it was also suddenly being appropriated in a particular way that had little to do with the circumstances informed by its immediate referents. The inclusion of the 'rural' artists in *The Neglected Tradition* thus created a sense of ambiguity in that, on the one hand, the work was part of the larger account of art forms by black artists that had until then had been overlooked, and on the other it embodied complex relationships in the intersections between what was viewed as 'the centre' and 'the periphery', 'the urban' and 'the rural', which had been previously explored by other exhibitions yet played out differently for various artists in the South African context. Artists like Segogela and Maswanganyi, for example, continue to navigate these dualities in ways that contradict the 'rules' of the art market but are now also influenced by other factors affecting developments in contemporary art. Until recently Segogela was showing with the Goodman Gallery, and Maswanganyi's work has been featured in a number of group exhibitions locally. Jackson Hlungwani also recently had a tribute exhibition held in his honour in Johannesburg.[90]

While there are institutions that have begun to exhibit and re-engage with these artists and their work, this tends to focus on a handful of the well-known artists whose works are now in significant private and public collections. In an article highlighting the need for a more rigorous engagement with these artists, I aimed to

[89] Sack, Interview, 21 May 2013.

[90] In November 2013 the Polokwane Municipal Art Museum held a retrospective exhibition of Hlungwani's work titled *Jackson Hlungwani – A New Jerusalem*, which later travelled to the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery in June 2014.

illustrate that these artists are sometimes represented by institutions in ways that differ significantly from those used for other artists working in urban settings. I also aimed to demonstrate that sometimes the way artists are made visible and received in the art market can be manipulated to serve particular interests (Mdluli 2014: 5). The exhibitions that featured these artists did not explicitly set out to do this; they did, however, create an environment for canon formation, which, as noted by Anna Brzyski, is about 'making qualitative distinctions, constantly identifying some works and artists as more significant than others' (2007: 2).

By the time the third *Cape Town Triennial* opened, only three artists (Hlungwani, Mabasa and Segogela) from the group categorised as 'rural' art were considered for inclusion in what was then one of South Africa's most prestigious art competitions and large-scale exhibitions. The Triennial was exhibited at some of the major art institutions in South Africa. It was launched at the South African National Gallery, which was one of two national institutions that hosted the competition.[91]

All three of these artists had some sort of institutional backing that probably facilitated their participation in the wider art network in ways that would not have been possible for them as 'rural' artists without this backing. Hlungwani's career was at the time being managed by Burnett, and Mabasa's and Segogela's by the Goodman Gallery. While the intention of the competition was for greater inclusivity in a national competition, the organisers were at the same time aware of the prestigious character it had acquired in the public eye (Van Niekerk 1988: 9). As observed by Brzyski, 'museums clearly understand the economic advantages of blockbuster exhibitions drawing on the canonical standards' (2007: 2). She argues that although they embark on unconventional, 'non-canonical projects' (2007: 2), they also know which shows will attract the largest audiences. However, the attention received by the third *Cape Town Triennial* in the press and in other writings focused on the controversy around the selection process in terms of the questions of who is included versus and is excluded. The kinds of debates that took place thereafter, I suggest, including the panel discussion held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery[92], are evidence of the existence of what Brzyski says are 'multiple, historically situated canonical formations' (2007: 2) because they ultimately raised questions around the

[91] See Chapter Four: Third *Cape Town Triennial* 1988, pg. 102.

[92] See Promotional tones: vehicles of publication and art history, page 116

mechanisms of the canonical system, which according to Brzyski entails questioning 'how and where canons are formed, by whom, and why they function under particular circumstances, how they are maintained, and why they may undergo change' (2007: 2).

This was certainly raised during the debate on what constitutes a prizeworthy artwork and who creates the criteria for this (Nettleton, cited by Berman 1989: no pagination)[93], which in a way foregrounded the phenomenon highlighted by Julie McGee where she discusses the art history of South Africa and how 'canons can become a point of dispute when at stake is a question of who gets to define the cultural identity of a particular group'. (McGee, cited in Brzyski 2007: 2) Karp and Lavine (1991) previously discussed some of these ideas in their study of the American example of museums that exhibit other cultures, which, although it stems from a different historical context, raises similar concerns. From a historical perspective, as outlined by Coombes, this is a general dilemma museums face in trying to determine what the ideal role of the museum should be in a transforming society. In the South African context, she argues, these debates took place alongside those 'redressing the perceived imbalances of hegemonic historical narrative in museums and heritage sites' (2004: 206). The institutional role of the South African National Gallery (although not discussed in detail) was bound to be informed by the policy changes Coombes identifies in the lead up to a democratic state. By the time the fourth Triennial was held in 1991, the competition, as stated by the chairperson Christopher Till, 'occupied an important position within the plethora of exhibitions of contemporary South African art' (1991: 7). Yet none of the 'rural' artists who were initially prominent in the early 1980s were selected for this competition, but others like Albert Munyui, Gazland Hlungwani and the Ndou brothers (Owen and Goldwin) were.

Gule concludes that there is no such thing as a 'rural' artist or a 'Limpopo' artist or a Venda artist, in the same way that there is no such thing as a suburban artist These categories, he suggests, are generalisations that have often been used to package these artists, but tend to overlook the intricate differences between their practices (2010: 120–21). Furthermore, he notes how there is a presumption that these artists 'are merely practicing the tradition of art making as an inherited craft passed

[93] Also see page 99 Chapter Four: The Third *Cape Town Triennial*

through generations' (2010: 121). While this is the case for some of these artists, there is an assumption that this view applies to all black artists working in traditional mediums such as wood and clay. Gule thus argues that this is a simplistic and patronising way of looking at these artists and the products they make, and also suggests that they are unconscious participants in a wider art market (2010: 121). For some 'rural' artists it meant playing both sides of the market, which, Sack suggests, may have simply been a misunderstanding of the market and how it operated; even if they understood very well what their art was about and what it sought to convey, it is possible that they didn't necessarily understand the subtleties of the exchange.[94] The language barrier thus became an important aspect to consider in this exchange. Sack suggest that given the fact that most of these artist could barely speak English, it is possible that there could have been some misunderstandings between these artists and their exchanges with art dealers and buyers in the art world, as well as with writers and researchers discussing and describing their work.

The importance of historical narratives in the construction of language is, according to Keith Moxey, 'concomitant with the awareness that the historian encounters the past only by means of linguistic representations' (1994: 3). He employs Dominick LaCapra's insight on texts, which asserts that historians are not necessarily always concerned with the raw material of history but instead 'their understanding of the past is always mediated by texts' (LaCapra, cited in Moxey 1994: 3). More significant, however, as pointed out by Moxey, is Norman Bryson's extension of this, which draws attention to 'the extent to which history is a constructed narrative' (Bryson, cited in Moxey 1994: 5). Bryson's findings, however, place more emphasis on the role of the historian in constructing this narrative, which, he argues, is informed by the context of the writer as opposed to the historical context of the works under study (Bryson, cited in Moxey 1994: 5). In concluding this study, I am thus cognisant of the fact that in revisiting the sculpture of these artists, my study aligns itself to Moxey's deconstructivist approach to art history, in which he states that 'it must claim a more limited and relative status for its conception of knowledge, while expanding the imaginative scope of its interpretations as well as their political and cultural relevance' (1994: 5).

[94] Sack, Interview, 2013.

The literature included in this study, by some contemporary African curators and curators of contemporary African art, is thus a means of considering Bryson's idea of 'the cultural context of the author's time' (Bryson, cited in Moxey 1994: 5), because their work is situated within a social and political context informed by a historical epoch marked by the prominence of large-scale exhibitions and the representation of traditional and contemporary African art in these exhibitions. King's discussion of large-scale exhibitions in the South African context hints at some of these concerns, demonstrating Moxey's assertion 'that the production of knowledge is always historically determined and knows no closure' (1994: 16). King's account on how these exhibitions disseminate knowledge takes a similar stance that knowledge not only has political significance in how it inscribes itself in cultural production, but is also inextricably linked to the social relations that surround its formulation of certain interpretations (Moxey 1994: 16).

The period that has been called 'the dawn of democracy' thus implies the moment before the first democratic elections but also the period marking the social and political shifts of the late 1980s. In the cultural sphere this was signified by events such as the 1982 *Culture and Resistance Symposium* held in Gaborone, Botswana. Its political and social significance encouraged other conferences and symposia that followed, such as *The Cultural Voice of Resistance* (1982) and the *Culture for Another South Africa* (1982) conferences, both held in Amsterdam, and the *Zabalaza Festival* in London in 1990 (Kellner & González 2009: 156). These platforms were also important because of the debates they stimulated and facilitated, which, in addition to affirming that in South Africa, culture could not be and ought not to be separated from politics, revealed the divisions in how the idea of a 'new' consciousness would be achieved through culture. This was an idea used by Wally Serote who was referring to how 'traditional' (African) art' would be included in the search for new forms of expression (2008: 237). However, as suggested by Diana Wylie, this may have been met with some resistance because 'to draw from rural art would have risked confirming the government's definition of African culture as essentially tribal' (2008: 241).

When Burnett opened *Tributaries,* his idea of 'wanting to hold a mirror up to "South Africaness", without erasing distinction or cultural difference' (Wylie 2008: 45) was, according to Wylie, the same as what the artists of MEDU had sought to do

— create equality. However, despite Burnett's claim that he was not making a political statement in setting up *Tributaries*, in the end his concerns were politically informed by denouncing what he saw as 'a narrow concept of political art that guided the MEDU artists', and his insistence that 'all who resolutely seek some sense of truth have political worth and should not be marginalized by ideological prejudices' (Burnett, cited by Wylie 2008: 245).

While in this statement Burnett runs the risk of implicating himself in what he calls 'self-congratulatory parochialism' (2008: 246), Wylie suggests that the attitudes of the South African art world, then, are what exonerate him and affirm the exhibition's status as 'pivotal' and a 'watershed' in South African art history (2008: 246).

The exhibition's goal of equality thus suggests that the 'rural' artists were for the first time given an equal amount of attention as their urban counterparts. However, this was not necessarily the case, because besides exposing the 'lingering colonial attitudes' (Wylie 2008: 246) of the South African art world, *Tributaries* also created a favourable environment where, as pointed out by Andrew Verster, 'much more had been added' (1985 99). This idea of adding, not only to the narrative of South African art history but also to different expressive forms, was recently visible in an exhibition featuring these artists at the Wits Art Museum (WAM). *Stars from the North: Revisiting sculpture from Limpopo* focused on works donated by Knysna Fine Art Gallery owner, Trent Read, by sculptors from the Limpopo region, most of whom form part of this study: Jackson Hlungwani, Noria Mabasa, Johannes Maswanganyi, Collen Maswanganyi, Nelson Mukhuba, Freddy Ramabulana, Philip Rikhotso, Johannes Segogela, Doctor Phutuma Seoka and Paul Thavhana. In many ways *Stars from the North* can assist in filling the gaps not only in the museum's collection of work from this area but also in the narration of the significance their works have in the story of South African art. In a review of the exhibition I suggest that 'revisiting implies rethinking or a reconsideration of a history' (Mdluli 2015). More often than not, it implies reviewing the flaws and even misinterpretations of a particular subject that may or may not have been overlooked. But it also offers the opportunity to re-examine certain aspects of the same subject afresh, which, when approached with a level of curatorial sensitivity, allows a much broader scope of interpretation and appreciation.

The renewed visibility of these artists through *Stars from the North* thus suggests the 'precarious self-reflective' position (Mdluli 2014: 4) in which South African art finds itself, which requires a deeper understanding of what these artists represent in the chronicles of South African art history. This, I suggest, can be achieved through a more rigorous engagement with the artists and their works within the institutions that present them to the public. This is not to say that institutions are obligated to support artists whose work they collect or exhibit but rather that institutions have a certain responsibility to the public they serve so as to probe the claim to impartiality and objectivity around which narratives are told and made visible within such institutions. This means engaging in programmes that will raise impassioned debates and also contribute meaningfully towards inclusivity and cultural cohesion, so that the self-reflective phase, although sometimes filled with uncertainty, can become an encouraging place for the upsurge of diverse aesthetics and new narratives to emerge (Mdluli 2014: 4–5).

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW NO. 1

**Ricky Burnett**

**Curator**

***Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art***

**30 May 2012**

**Ricky Burnett Studio, Rosebank**

**Ricky Burnett**: I haven't actually done any homework so…go for it. Tell me a bit about your thesis, the subject of your thesis, what's your argument?

**Same Mdluli**: Well, I am looking at three exhibitions that happened in the 1980s. The first one is *Tributaries*, then it is the third *Cape Town Triennial*, the 1988 one, and lastly *The Neglected Tradition*. The reason being the three of them seem to have a common thread, where 'rural' artists were very prominent starting from the *Tributaries* exhibition and fading in the rest of the exhibitions that followed. In other words I am looking at why, after that, these artists seem to have 'fizzled out' (disappeared from view) as well as why in the written commentary about these artists they seem to have been promoted in particular ways in relation to those three exhibitions. The exhibition could thus give clues as to why these artists are no longer featured in the mainstream art market…

**RB**: You know about the big Jackson Hlungwani retrospective in 1989?

**SM**: Yes.

**RB**: Because that sort of didn't 'fizzle out', but then it did 'fizzle out' after I had done a couple of exhibitions with him.

**SM**: Yes.

**RB**: But that's another story, we can talk about that later…

How did the idea of the exhibition come about?

Well, let me give you some anecdotal background. Before I did *Tributaries* I was working with Bill Ainslie at the Johannesburg Art Foundation; in fact, I helped him start the Johannesburg Art Foundation in a way because until others and myself came along, he was teaching privately as I am doing now, but that was all it was.

Amongst some of us came those who were a bit younger, and he realised then that there may be, and I hesitate to use the word professional but in a sense vocationally driven rather than hobby driven, opportunity for some other kind of educational facility in the city. At some point during that time, Tony Caro, the British sculptor, had been invited here by I think the Durban Art Gallery. They were running a sculpture competition and he came out to be the judge thereof and visited Johannesburg and also visited the Art Foundation to speak to us. Bill and I took him to FUBA (The Federation Union of Black Artists), which was in those days run by Sipho Sephula. Tony Caro's view was 'What can we do?', 'What injection of energy can we put into this?' His view was he knows artists so what if he got a collection of art together, that could be used as a sort of either inspiration for the students or as fundraising leverage for the organization. He did not get a major collection of major work obviously because it was all donated but he got some big names in there. God knows what has happened to that collection now. But the fact is that he started to get this together. My ex-wife was also at the Art Foundation and in correspondence with Caro and his associates and Bill and us at the Art Foundation, she took over the administration of this project.

Now…

This is the serendipitous way in which history happens… because she took over the management of this collection and Mary Slack of the Oppenheimer family who was friendly with one of Robert Lorde, who sat on the little board of trustees to help manage the project as one always had trustees in those days — she happened to be having dinner and sitting next to her was the Chief Executive Officer of BMW in those days, a man called Eberhard von Koerber. She said (Mary Slack) to him, 'Why

don’t you support or put your money into this collection that’s coming over?’ He (Eberhard von Koerber) thought it was a good idea and so they did that. We then managed the tour of this collection and there is a point to all of this I promise you. Von Koerber said, ‘Why don’t we get some artists from Germany to donate work so that we can add to the collection?’ and so he contacted the cultural officer in Munich, who in a moment of laziness thought ‘I’ll pass the buck back’ and responded by suggesting we bring an exhibition of art to Germany. They then phoned me, well they phoned my ex-wife Sandra, who then asked me, ‘What do you think?’ And I thought immediately that this is what we have to do. This is the opportunity to do an exhibition that nobody’s thought of before and it was so obvious and it honestly took me about five seconds to say ‘You know what? I think this is what we should do’. And everybody sort of looked at me and thought yes, it is great idea and so on, but I didn’t know that Jackson Hlungwani, or Phutuma Seoka, or Maswanganyi or any of these guys existed. I just had this hunch that given the society we were living in… nobody had bothered to look.

Right.

Having been a sort of romantic and kind of idealist in some ways, I had this notion that if people all over the globe have been fiddling with wood or paint or pigment for thousands of years, then there is no reason why they shouldn’t still be doing it — whether it is in Gazankulu as it was then called or Venda as it was then called. So I took the gamble that we could, on the basis of that hunch, do a show that no one had done before. So they said yes and honestly it took no more than that and that evening I met with their communications manager who said, ‘This is fantastic, let’s do it’… and that’s how it happened. That’s how the idea came about.

It seems to me, and I think I said this in the catalogue of *Tributaries,* as you must have seen, that we were very comfortable. I always felt, being associated with the Johannesburg Art Foundation, that there was too much weight given to the idea that serious art was somehow associated with the universities. That yes, there were professionals like Villa and Skotnes who weren’t working within such institutions, but by and large most of the practising artists who sold through the galleries were

considered by the universities to not really be the real thing because it was the guys in the universities that were considered to be the real thing. You had suburban art and then you had the academies or the academics and then you had this concept of 'township art' which was essentially caricatured by the guys from Alex and Soweto, carrying around their work in the city. What we used to call 'roll ups'. They used to carry pastel drawings and roll them up and then flog them at all the lawyers down town, it was a way to make a living. I called it *Tributaries* in that you have got all these different threads flowing in and no one had allowed them to flow together, you know, they were sort of demarcated sources. And that's it. I have answered that second question, haven't I?

**SM**: Yes.

**RB**: Third question?

**SM**: The categories.

**RB**: I think, I have often been, especially by people like Kendell Geers, have taken the piss from time to time about the fact that I appeared to be self-conscious about the various categories that I played with. And I think he missed the point because, it was about being in a highly categorised environment, it was only by self-consciously taking on broad elements like 'black women rural/urban', 'white men rural/urban', 'women', 'white women rural/urban', 'black men', and then thinking, well, yes, there is conceptual work, there is small work, there is sculptural, there is sort of quasi-expressionist work, there is eccentric work. So I was constantly aware of all these variables and I didn't work to a formula but I did work consciously aware that there were multiple variables to take into account. I realised that I needed to do this if I was going to do, what I had set out to do which was to take a fairly wide net. I wasn't looking for one species of butterfly; I was looking for all the species of butterflies I could find. So yes, the categories were there, but they were self-consciously there and so I would argue that the proof of the pudding always is in the empirical results of the exhibition. While in some way I was too self-conscious about these categories, I would point to the exhibition and say but when you were in the exhibition it all

meshed. Marilyn Martin quite famously wrote somewhere that one of the most extraordinary things about *Tributaries* was that it was seamless. That you could have abstract work next to highly figurative work; work from Venda next to work by artists that had done an MA but you were able to read the integrity of each piece.

BMW was not at all involved in the selection process; it was left entirely to my discretion. There was a rider to this… and it was that Karin Skawran, who was professor of Fine Art at UNISA, who was also friendly with Eberhard von Koerber's wife, because these guys work this way, they said that I should confer with the CEO's wife and with Professor Skawran. It was a very easy thing to do because I was doing stuff neither of them could really get it and I would just say, 'Well, I've seen this and I've seen that,' and they would say, 'Oh, fantastic'. There was no sense or moment of anxiety. We showed Gavin Younge's piece, which was sort of a stainless-steel structure epitomising one of the tricameral parliaments and he made a comment in the catalogue which I published, well typed, about how silly the idea of tricameral parliament is and this whole thing of should we be making a political statement came up, but I said, 'Yes,' and they said, 'Oh okay'. So, there just wasn't any particular pressure and I think they bought into, was a sort of liberal piety at the time and I think it's still the kind of liberal piety that we should be exploring, especially in the light of Brett Murray and anxious Zulu men about their penises and all of that stuff. The point I made was that there was incredible diversity in this country, and it wasn't just a question of black and white. It was a question of different class structures; it was a question of different kinds of urban living environments, different kinds of rural living environments and different traditions that ran through all of these categories, I suppose. So any time anyone says, 'Well, should we…?', I say, 'Yes,' but in the name of diversity. That's the game we were playing, we were demonstrating this diversity and you know that word bought me a hell of a lot of leeway…

'Okay, so question five: Could you elaborate on the range of artists you selected as well as which places you encountered some of these artists, specifically the Rural Traditional and Rural Transitional?'

You know the… I'm not sure how to answer the question… elaborate on the range... Well, I mean the range actually has to speak for itself, I suppose. In the catalogue you can see what I was doing. Most of what I would call the 'rural traditional', which is essentially just beads, the couple of the beaded pieces, I in fact got from people who collected in the field, I didn't have the expertise or the context to do that. What happened with the Transitional stuff is much more interesting. Anitra Nettleton gave me the name and the contact for Nelson Mukhuba. I happened to see a little carving at a shop in Midrand and asked where it came from and I found Phutuma Seoka. I was at the Cultural History Museum in Pretoria and I saw a little carving and then I found Paul Tavhana. And then so it was about taking a photograph of the little things you saw and then driving out and asking people, 'Have you seen one of these? Do you know who made this? Do you know anybody here who makes this sort of thing?' And if they did they would say, 'Yes, if you go towards that mountain and turn left at the tree…' and that's what we did.

I had a low-flying BMW and lots of petrol in it, and we just drove and drove all over the place. I want to say this though: I mean, I don't know if this question you ask, this question also of the transitional artist… nothing happened with one visit, there were always general visits, if I decided that that was somebody whose work I would put on the show, I probably visited them three of four times to make sure that we were in a relationship, unlike what happened after the exhibition when people went around with trucks and bought everything, which is kind of heartbreaking in a way but… it's life, unfortunately

So I don't know if this answers the question?

**SM**: Yes.

**RB**: 'Was it a brief provided by BMW?' No.

**SM**: I think you have answered that already…

**RB**: Yes. [Question] 'Seven: What are some of the logistical challenges you faced? …Well, I mean you know the logistical challenges in relation to almost everybody had to do with the quality of communication, which was particularly challenging in the case of the rural guys. And that's why I made four or five visits and I arranged to get stuff from them over time, rather than just once off. Look, the fact of the matter is that at that stage the guys in the rural areas weren't entirely sure what I was talking about. They were obviously flattered by all of the attention and I bought some stuff, which I was able to; sometimes I didn't buy it because it came from them. I did the fetching and carrying of it to make it easy but in both, in all cases, the common logistical problem if you like is establishing one's credibility and honesty, and getting everybody excited…

**SM**: And how did you deal with that?

**RB**: I talk…

**SM**: Because I would imagine some of them didn't even trust you…

**RB**: That's why one made multiple trips and speaks out on good terms and there was an occasion where I met Laduma Madela — have you heard of Leduma Madela? He is sort of a prophet person living in KwaZulu-Natal and he had a German anthropologist who had spent years and years working with him, a lady called Katesa Schlosser. I had been to visit Laduma, I had spoken to him about doing some drawings for the exhibition and the next time I turned up this German anthropologist is there photographing me as though I was a criminal. She wrote angry letters to BMW about her idea of how I had exploited this man but I went and spoke to him with an interpreter about whether he would want to be in a South African exhibition, and he did, but she felt… you know the sort of paranoia and anger around this sort of stuff, all of this stuff, that can sort of be strangely taxing. But we will come to the aftermath later.

**SM**: So what are some of the challenges you faced while sourcing the material for the exhibition, especially when it came to identifying the appropriate artists?

**RB**: Well, I don't know how to answer that. The real challenge, as I said… look, the important thing is the quality of communication and establishing a relationship and a trust, and as I said, I got to know them all hell of a well of the people that were on the show and we got to make multiple visits to everybody but you know when it came to identifying appropriate artists or appropriate work it's the same as in any other situation. Does the work look authentic, you know, is it driven by the kind of, I hesitate to use the word universals, because it is not about universal value, it's about a kind of single human virtue, which is honest, good, interesting, exciting, vivid work. I am going to say something on the record that you could consider at your leisure: doing a good exhibition is a kind of showbusiness because you are providing an entertainment, an intelligent entertainment for an intelligent audience. So you dish up the meal in a way. I mean those are the sort of exhibitions and the style of curating that I am attracted to. I am not attracted to the arid. There's nothing more irksome and soulless than curators who set about trying to unpack a philosophical concept. I think philosophers philosophise, artists make art, they are different things but maybe I'm just old fashioned you see, but I feel I'm old, I feel I'm entitled to be old fashioned.

'Some of the challenges faced during sourcing?'

I mean, we did, the important thing was to take time to talk to people, to get their trust, and of course to get everybody to come and see the show, and you know I think it was a huge shot in the arm for everybody; of course not everybody was able to… we'll come to the thing of sustaining or not.

**SM**: Other advisors, artists as to how the show would be displayed?

**RB**: I did it, I did it all entirely myself…

**SM**: Who did you imagine would attend and be the primary audience?

**RB**: Well, I mean… the primary audience, as I had said, I think it's entertainment for intelligent people, it's an opportunity for insight for intelligent people. You know, I

would say this on the record: my focus was never on the German audience and what would be and what they would think. I know that that was the stated purpose of the project but my purpose of the show was to show it here, my vision was I needed, I took this opportunity to say something about this country to people in this country that they hadn't seen before and that was where my… so I think expectations of audience that have absolutely… I mean, I can't give you the numbers but there were thousands of people who went to the exhibition.

As far as the sanctions-busting exercise, I have to say I think that there is an element of naivety disguised as a political awareness here. It is not a political awareness; it is a naivety. The idea that a massive industrial organisation like BMW and a massively militarised and complex regime like the apartheid regime would think of an art exhibition as having any particular sort of sanctions-busting power… there was a feel-good factor and at the end of the day, why not? But I cannot see for one minute how anyone can argue that the implications were about sanctions busting. Look, I think that BMW were probably rationalising amongst themselves that 'Wouldn't it look good if it looked as though we were contributing to the growth of South African culture?' And the truth of the matter is that it did… I think. I mean, I would argue that it did. I would argue that at the risk of sanctions-busting, what actually happens is that it burst open opportunities in this country for people to see themselves differently and for artists of many different types to be taken seriously, who weren't taken seriously before. So if anyone is going to bust anything, I think we were busting the stereotypes in this country and I think busting sanctions was a much tougher political project. I am not going to claim any credit for it, either way, because that's a bigger game. It's strange to me, just by the way, how during the apartheid years and the years thereafter there was a lot of concern about art as a weapon for struggle and you had books about anti-apartheid art so to speak and then there is all this stuff about the Brett Murray thing and then you kind of think real politics is much bigger and tougher than that actually, you know what I mean?

**SM**: Yes.

**RB**: The idea that a single image can somehow carry all this massive political resonance unless you concoct it, which is what happened with the Brett Murray thing, the image is impotent until you concoct the story. The point of the *Tributaries* exhibition is that the story was: look at the diversity of life in this country, look at the biographies that exist in the rural areas amongst the marginalised of the marginalised, which is why I did the Jackson Hlungwani retrospective to put in a life as it were. So sanctions-busting, I don't believe there was that motive. I mean, from the outside somebody might say that was the consequence but you know I just don't believe for one minute that serious German industrialist sat down with cabinet ministers from the Nationalist government and said 'Hey, let's do an art exhibition to bust sanctions'. I mean! No!

**SM**: What are some of the advantages of working with a sponsored show?

**RB**: Well, I think one of the advantages is that because it was a car company I was able to travel a lot along the countryside so that worked. I think because it was not driven by a museum I was given a lot more freedom than I would have had if I was working for an art-based institution. There would have been too many vested interests, too many ideologies, too many opinions about what 'ought to be' whereas BMW didn't have any opinions about what 'ought to be' so I was very free in that environment.

So that's question 13. Can I do question 14?

**SM**: Yes.

**RB**: 'What is the role of the curator and how do you think this has changed from when you curated this exhibition?'

Well, the interesting thing is that I don't think in this country we ever used the word curator, up to that point. I think in claiming credit for what I can… I have to say I may have been one of the first to break out of the judging pattern. At the time, what's his name… Raymond van Niekerk, Alan Crump and Christopher Till were like three

sagacious men but you could never get past, they were the gatekeepers you see all the time… I think the role of a curator has changed a little bit. I am accused by people like Mary Corrigall as being seriously out of touch with contemporary art in this country and I don't think she is right. I think I am impatient with a lot of what goes under the name of contemporaneity and I am suspicious of its language and its pretentions. I don't know that I'm completely out of touch with it because for me, I'll go back to this question of what's the role of the curator and it's something that I did when I ran Newtown Galleries and actually an attitude which informed what I did with the *Horse* show at the Everard Read last year. This idea of showbusiness and entertainment I have become more and more attached to… I do think that it's about… this is going to sound terribly *Reader's Digest* actually, but we'll do it anyway. I actually think that a curator's job is to create magical spaces, to create zones of experience that are not mundane and you use art to do that, irrespective of what you've got, and irrespective of how it's chosen. Once you have the work in your hands, the real curator's challenge is architecture. The key pivot around which a curator needs to learn to work is the threshold — what happens when you cross from mundane reality across a threshold into another reality — and if you can use art, painting, sculpture, installation whatever, to change the air, the shape of the space, the tone of it, the emotional intensity of it, the colour, and I don't mean by colour specific colour. I mean the general feeling tone of it; about the luminosity that you can generate, so if you hang an exhibition well the work can always be more or less interesting in and of itself, but the totality is always bigger than the bits… that's the curator's job. It's production, it's orchestration and I think if the artist switches to make an argument that's one thing but curators that make arguments seems to me to become very heavy-handed because it's like it's a thesis and I think that the communication that happens — and again I am sort of a romantic and a sort of phenomenologist in a way — I think the most exciting communication that one has with art happens sort of almost through the ether. I'm not a 'mysterium' person, I'm not into the mysteries of the universe, I'm not a kind of metaphysician, I don't buy the idea that consciousness exists all over the place, but I do think that there are all sorts of subliminal communications that happen when you are looking at a painting. That to some extent the best within ourselves is not the tiny little bit of consciousness that's being articulated at any one time, and that's why one reads great books, that's why a

line of poetry can be very beautiful because it's just got that other life to it, and for me it's not about the argument, for me it's about experience.

Am I answering your question or am I going off?

**SM**: No.

**RB**: What I would say about this space thing, what has always interested me and what I did with *Tributaries* and to some extent with Jackson, but when I ran my own gallery I did this lot, and then with the *Horse* exhibition the same thing — what I want to tell you about *Tributaries* and in the context of the *Horse* show as well is that they have a lot in common. What I think has been limited to *Tributaries* is this limited issue that it was about black and white and that it was about the rural and the city. Yes, that was the face value of it but the underlying philosophical urge, if you like, was how do you make this diversity work in a seamless sort of way and how is it possible that you can take multiple voices and articulate them in such a way, in a piece of architecture such that each voice retains its sound but it all works together… that's always fascinating and I did that with the *Horse* show. So you can take on board lesser works or off-key works or works that appear to you now… because it's how you… you can put all sorts of ingredients in the stew but if you don't pitch it right… it doesn't work.

So that's for me the most exciting part. Yes, there was this sort of political awareness that we lived in a divided society but underneath that is the fact that we have these multiple voices and how do they work together. And I mean you could see that with the Brett Murray thing; how the multiple voices are still there and the multiple voices still don't know how to talk to each other!

Okay, so where were we… which parts of Germany did the show tour? You know, I don't really remember.

**SM**: One of the things I'm finding because I've been to MuseuMAfricA because that's where the show was held and the JAG archives and there's not a lot written about the show here…

**RB**: Nothing happened.

**SM**: And I am not get anything…Yes, nothing happened.

**RB**: And I think that's fair enough. I think that's more or less what did happene… sort of nothing. I don't think they knew what they were doing and landed up with more than they bargained for… I think it just sort of skips around without anybody paying any real attention. But the truth of it is what was important for me was that it happened. I think there may have been some works purchased but I didn't buy any… you know once it had got to Germany…

**SM**: Did you go?

**RB**: I went for the opening… but then my contract ended and that was taken over. I didn't even wind the exhibition down when it came back here, I was living in England, and I went to live in England for a couple years because I could feel that there were going to be consequences and I didn't want to be here to own them… do you know what I mean? I wanted the effect of the exhibition to be its own process and not to be here constantly to either have fingers pointed at me or you know… constantly having 'Ricky Burnett this…'. I wanted the show to be the same so I left.

'Was the afterlife of the exhibition something you expected or did it form organically thereafter from the content produced by the written commentary?'

No, did you see a piece that Andrew Verster wrote in the *Leadership* magazine?

**SM**: No, but I know there's a quote…

**RB**: He said, 'Nothing will be the same again'.

**SM**: Yes.

**RB**: And it was quite a well-written piece actually… I am going to answer one of your questions now, number twenty… 'Do I have any personal memorabilia?'

The problem is that I don't…

I made a stupid decision about thirteen years ago. I had got really exhausted and tired and my idealism was shattered and I said something very stupid to my ex-wife and we went to America to live there and you know it was a complete disaster from beginning to end, for me. That all my… we had a container… I had a big art collection that I had assembled, organically, not with money or anything… but it had come to me because of all my relationships, and the container of goods arrived in the States and within a week, someone had broken the locks and taken everything you could carry. So photographs of *Tributaries,* all the archival material, all the material I had gathered together when I was researching *Tributaries,* all my art collection… everything… it went, so there's nothing… absolutely nothing.

**SM**: Yes, that's the other thing as well is that I haven't seen any images of the exhibition.

**RB**: Yes, I don't have any, they all went, all the negatives, all the photographs… everything. But what you could get… is… I've forgotten her name, but this librarian at UNISA and if you get it, I want a copy. She made a copy for me. I had a student come and see me, I cannot remember who it was, I lent it to her and she never gave it back. It's a DVD… and do you know of Ivor Powell?

**SM**: Yes.

**RB**: Ivor Powell was working at UNISA at the time of *Tributaries* and he came and interviewed me on camera and so you can get it on DVD. It's of Ivor and I talking,

sitting in the exhibition and the camera is panning everything. That's the only way you can get to it.

I might have some leftover press cuttings somewhere but do you have those sorts of things?

**SM**: Bits and pieces from JAG, the JAG library seems to be the most organised.

**RB**: I mean… it's the only functioning element of JAG. Just give me a minute, let me go and have a look and see if I've got it in a file upstairs… I'll just get a few things from the States. You know all my Jackson Hlungwani records; all my Jackson Hlungwani sculptures are all gone. I have nothing.

We haven't actually gotten around to the… let's see, the other exhibitions…

Well, look here, a whole lot of… right on top there's a whole lot of stuff. The SABC did a… should have some… stuff. I'll show you what I'm picking out in a minute… this is all Newtown Gallery stuff.

I don't know what happened to that *Leadership* article… so do you want to ask me a question…?

**SM**: Well, I guess the lack of material… what I've picked up as well is that the show is referenced a lot through the biographies of the artists.

**RB**: Yes.

**SM**: There isn't really a record of the exhibition itself except through the artists that participated in the show and so I think my question really is how would you say it has functioned because it is also referenced a lot in writings about contemporary developments of art in South Africa as a… at the forefront of shifting that sort of understanding of art.

**RB**: Yes, I think that there hasn't been any real intelligent writing about it… I think it's almost as though…

You see these are the scraps of my life, everything else has disappeared and I had boxes and boxes of stuff… I mean, I had an entire suitcase this big full of all the research material when I went and it just got taken because it was in a box… I mean, they didn't know what was in it, they just took it and then put it in the fire presumably.

**SM**: Do you have an archive?

**RB**: No, I ran away and came here and my ex-wife just sent me sort of random boxes of stuff. So here are some press cuttings from the time, will you look after them and give them back to me?

**SM**: Yes.

**RB**: Because most of those I won't have copies of and some of them are originals. There was a piece that Gavin Younge wrote in a magazine called… Denis Beckett edited it at the time. I think it was called *Frontline*, and you may have to ask Denis Beckett, do you know Denis Beckett? You may have to ask him… I'll give you his phone number, ask him if he's got archives. Gavin Younge would have written it in 1984 and he might have a copy of it, I will give you Denis Beckett's telephone number. Do you want it?

**SM**: Yes please.

**RB**: And I've never been able to get a hold of that *Leadership* article that Andrew Verster wrote but maybe you can contact Andrew and if you can get it then I'd like a copy of that too… so okay, Denis Beckett is… Andrew Verster's number I don't have any more but I'm sure you can get it… as a historian you can find it.

Okay, so I am going to trust these to you.

**SM**: Sure.

**RB**: And you can photocopy or maybe I can photocopy — no… because I have got no ink in my… but if you could please look after them because you can see I am hanging on to scraps of my life here.

**SM**: Yes, well if you need someone to help you sort it out, I can help…

**RB**: I think if I had everything that I used to have… it could form a really, you know, a proper archive and history and so on, but it kind of just depresses me that it's not here, you know what I mean? And so I kind of don't want to look at it…

Do I need to… now this question of… particularly in relation to the rural artist, your question… how come it didn't sustain?

**SM**: I think the main thing is… because there is so little available about the exhibition I wanted to get the sense of how it came about and through that getting the pieces of… because I am also thinking of visiting some of these places to see if there are remnants of that art left…

**RB**: Noria Mabasa would be a useful contact for you.

**SM**: I'm told she doesn't like visitors.

**RB**: There was… SABC would have archival material… somewhere. There was a… I don't know how you would get hold of it though… do they archive everything?

**SM**: Yes, I guess.

**RB**: Because in 1984 there were a couple of art programmes and they were these social programmes and I remember the SABC actually did a documentary; well, they did a smallish documentary on *Tributaries* and I remember they also filmed the

opening and did interviews with people like Malcolm Payne and stuff like that. So the SABC would be a source, the UNISA library is a source, SABC, Andrew Verster on his *Leadership* article, I think he must have a copy somewhere, I'm sure he can send it and there is the Gavin Younge's article in *Frontline.*

**SM**: I think the other thing is that… what I have picked up is that Hlungwani became the most prominent of these artists because he's… I don't want to say the 'star' of the show, but those are the kinds of things that I am looking at.

**RB**: You know, I did his retrospective in '89 and it wasn't easy and there are still incredible misconceptions flying around about our relationship. The assumption that… I was the exploiter of his innocence with what happened… I'll come to that in a minute.

Yes, look… Jackson was a more complex personality, he was a more complex thinker, he was driven by more obscure thoughts in a way. Phutuma Seoka and Johannes Maswanganyi, they were happy to make whatever you told them to make, Jackson would make what God told him to make and f*#k you otherwise! Noria was kind of a professional in the sense that she wanted to make a living doing this and because poor old Nelson Mukhuba just… I think Nelson Mukhuba had some… you know, he had an emotional breakdown. I mean, whether or not that had anything to do with his work as an artist or whether it had anything to do with… I mean, who knows… we all have… I mean, the reflex reaction happened and because he was exposed to a white big-city audience and his work was sold, I don't know that that was an issue, you know, I don't know, I wasn't here I was in England at the time. I think too much is made of innocence and naivety frankly. I say this now in relation to Jackson because Beezy Bailey… when Jackson died last year… beginning of last year, Beezy Bailey wrote an obituary in *Artthrob* for *Artthrob*. I didn't see it until recently when someone pointed it out to me in which Beezy Bailey says, you know, Ricky Burnett did a good job with *Tributaries* and Jackson Hlungwani but to his everlasting shame he said … to my everlasting shame… I destroyed (his) Jackson's altars at Mbokoto and I was… I have heard this sort of stuff before and in fact there were even people teaching in the art history department who were offering this sort of

point of view until someone put them right, but that's a rather big spoil for moral highground, they didn't like to hear that that wasn't the case, they wanted it to be true. I phoned Beezy and he was all gung-ho about 'You did, you shouldn't have'… but the truth of the matter is this… when we did the retrospective Jackson asked me to manage his career, he asked me to manage his work because people were paying peanuts and walking away with the best of the best and so I had to stand in between that and say look, we've got a major talent and these are major works and these are the prices. I was meticulous in my record keeping of all of this sort of stuff. Of course, I don't have those records anymore because they went the same as everything else. But … and specifically as per the altar pieces, I had budgeted to take them back to Mbokoto and we wanted to do the show and the altar pieces are central to his oeuvre and he wanted to bring them down. He said to me when they were here… and whether or not it was a decision he regretted, I can't say, but I mean… we all take decisions we regret. All decisions that happen…

He said, 'They are in Johannesburg, we're doing God's work amongst the city and they must stay here,' and I said, 'Oh oh… I'm not sure if I like that,' so I got Rev. Theo Schneider who was a priest at the time that had known Jackson for long time and who was a fluent Tsonga speaker. We did the conversation again and Rev. Theo Schneider recorded it on tape… I don't have it, but of course Theo has it and Rayda Becker… do you know Rayda? Rayda Becker could give you verbal assurance of this... this case because she has listened to the tape many times. Jackson said I want those…'You must sell those pieces to be for the people in Johannesburg'. So my responsibility then is to make sure that those pieces stay together as altar pieces because there were others who wanted to buy little bits of pieces here and there, so I made sure we kept them together and one went to Wits and one to JAG. So, yes, and they went to collectors probably for a lot cheaper than they would have gone individually but I wanted to keep them together and that I felt was exercising my responsibility.

There are two things that this sort of honky white liberal attitude displayed and it's that because Jackson was black and rural, he had no free agency… I said to Beezy, 'Who owned those sculptures, who made them?' 'Ag, but they should have been a

national monument'… I said, 'Well, would you have looked after them? Would you have stopped the people going up in trucks and buying them for 50c? Would you have gone against Jackson's instructions because you feel that as a black rural peasant he doesn't have any agency… don't you understand I was his agent? He told me what to do I didn't tell him what to do… "…Oh, but you made him"… 'Beezy. it was Jackson's work, it was his life, he took the decision, not me. Just because I am white doesn't mean to say I take all the decisions anyway'… it keeps coming up and it was very painful at the time because there was all sorts of stuff about how I had stolen his money… his bank account… oh Jesus! It was dreadful. However…it's over.

**SM**: Did you see the piece now at the museum?

**RB**: The tall one? Yes, I sold it to the collector originally.

**SM**: Have you been to the Wits Art Museum?

**RB**: Yes, I was there last week.

**SM**: Well, thank you very much.

**RB**: Will you look after those and get them back to me as soon as possible?

**SM**: Yes, I will.

**RB**: Just let me know when you have copied them.

**SM**: I'll bring them back next week.

**RB**: Okay… and honestly, if you can get some of that other stuff, a) I think you'll love it and b) I would like a copy. I'm embarrassed to go back to UNISA to ask for a copy because they went to a lot of trouble to get me one. But you shouldn't have any difficulty. I have forgotten her name though but I'm sure you can find out easily enough.

**SM**: If I have any more questions can I email you?

**RB**: Yes, but you can always just pop in for 15 minutes, half an hour if you want to.

**SM**: Thank you very much.

**RB**: Pleasure…it's a pleasure.

**SM**: This is all I could get from MuseuMAfrica. They scanned in for me.

**RB**: What is it?

**SM**: A letter.

**RB**: Yes, I had fifteen trucks going in and out and emptying all the sand to empty the space. Then I got building contractors to build walls and put in lights and I got all this done for free on a sponsorship basis… madness… however, we did it.

## APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW NO. 2

**Steven Sack**

**Curator**

***The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art***

**21 May 2013**

**Origin Centre, Wits University, Johannesburg**

**Same Mdluli**: Well, my research is primarily on three exhibitions, Ricky Burnett's *Tributaries*, the *Third Cape Triennial*, and *The Neglected Tradition*, and the reason being that the three share a common thread in how 'rural' artists were included and I am looking at why they seem to have been prominent in the early 1980s, from when Ricky first featured them and then towards 1994 they almost completely disappear from the mainstream and from exhibitions. What I've done is pick out six of them and I have done a chart: Jackson Hlungwani, Noria Mabasa, Johannes Maswanganyi, Johannes Segogela, Nelson Mukhuba (but of course Mukhuba committed suicide). I have plotted from the moment when they appear in *Tributaries* and plotted a trajectory of where else they appear and it is almost amazing to see how after that moment, they appear in the same exhibitions; so if you have told the story of one you have told the story of the rest. But of course with Jackson Hlungwani and Mabasa, who I think had more successful careers than the others, and maybe a little bit of Segogela to a certain extent because I worked at the Goodman Gallery for a while…

**Steven Sack**: Is Segogela still alive?

**SM**: Yes, he's still alive.

**SS**: And is he still working?

**SM**: Yes.

**SS**: He hasn't had an exhibition in a long time.

**SM**: Yes, he hasn't. The last exhibition he had was with Eliza Kentridge at Goodman in Cape Town, I was working there at the time.

**SS**: Yes, he did the little figures…

**SM**: Yes, so in a sense I think I wanted to find out (because I had an interview with Ricky) what as a curator of that exhibition and I'm sure you have followed how it has reappeared in the South African art-historical narrative, what are some of the reasons why those artists are no longer visible.

**SS**: I don't know if you have read the essays in the Joburg Biennale catalogues but one writer questions why the first Biennale curators brought international curators to Johannesburg. Why were we asking foreign curators to curate South African art? No doubt Christopher Till and Lorna Ferguson had their reasons, but it was a controversial move. What happened? As they arrived they were put on a bus and they were taken to Limpopo... to 'Venda'. At the time the most compelling art was coming from that part of the country. South Africans in the art and architectural sectors were intrigued at the extent and boldness of the work produced by black South Africans. The notion of 'transitional' art became the framing device, the language that emerged after the *Tributaries* exhibition to indicate that this was a 'new' category of artistic practice in South Africa.

Whereas now, if you brought curators to Johannesburg, you wouldn't leave the urban centres… there appears to be very little or nothing going on anymore in that rural heartland. What has happened, post 1994, is that you have a real solid urban black artistic production, whereas pre 1994, and in those times, there's a suggestion that the urban art scene was perhaps a little moribund. There was discourse around 'township art' and the kinds of conditions and the circumstances under which people were working, in and around the major cities and especially Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. But the need for artists to sell work meant that the urban scene was very constrained by market forces and the taste of gallerists and consumers. The international stage had been closed down by the cultural boycott. So in the midst of

this boycott the Joburg Biennale brings numerous foreign curators to mentor young curators and to curate a South African artist with an artist from their home country.

Is there a parallel to my situation as regards *The Neglected Tradition*? There were certainly black intellectuals and academics who felt the curator should have been black.

As it turns out, given the constraints of resources, the conservative and racist politics of the day and the speed with which Christopher Till wanted to make headway in transforming the Johannesburg Art Gallery and its tainted history, this was always going to be a difficult project.

I had grown up within the Johannesburg art scene and from the 1960s I already knew many of the artists. My late father, Monty Sack, had used his influence as the Chief Architect in the Schlesinger Organisation, a significant property development company in the ’60s to the ’80s, to acquire a collection of South African art. In the 1980s, I had been at Funda Centre for a few years and also understood the breadth and range of the 20$^{th}$-century South African art scene.

So firstly the one thing that you need to realise, with respect to *The Neglected Tradition*, was the way it came about, through Christopher Till and his dynamic team of curatorial staff, all of whom have made great contributions to South African art since the mid-1980s (Rochelle Keene, Julia Meintjies, Leslie Spiro, Brendon Bell and others). Christopher was the new director and from 1986, with the controversial celebration of the 100th birthday of the City of Johannesburg, which was held at the Joburg Gallery, Chris was under pressure to distance himself from his apartheid bosses and form a meaningful bridge to black artists living and working in Joburg and further afield.

I had at that time established the African Institute of Art at the Funda Centre in the 1980s, under the leadership of Matsemela Manaka, my first black boss.

Christopher Till invited Matsemela Manaka and myself to a meeting to brainstorm ways of making JAG relevant to everyone.

**SM**: Yes, I have heard of Matsemela.

**SS**: Matsemela Manaka was an important figure in the emerging art scene. His son is Mak Manaka, the poet. Matsemela was an activist living in Soweto, having grown up in a part of Soweto that saw a fair amount of confrontational political action over many decades. In fact, the current head of the South African Army, Solly Shoke, grew up in the same neighbourhood. The Funda Centre was set up by the Urban Foundation in the early 1980s and they brought Matsemela in to set up an art centre. The extraordinary thing about Matsemela is that his politics leant towards the PAC (Pan African Congress) line and it's always been interesting to me, and to my understanding of the PAC position, that he approached me to come and set up an art department at Funda. Matsemela had worked at *Staffrider*, a creative journal of writing, poetry, photography and Fine Art, and was well networked amongst artists and activists in Joburg from the '70s to the '80s. At the time I was a lecturer at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in the Fine Art department and there were no places at that time where black South African artists could do a degree programme in Fine Art. So they could go to Rorke's Drift and they could get training but they couldn't go to universities. Fort Hare had a Fine Art Department from fairly early on and an important collection assembled by Prof. de Jager. There were no universities anywhere near to Soweto; in fact, the only university that black artists could study through was UNISA and even political prisoners studied through UNISA. So they couldn't get into Wits at that time, they couldn't get into Michaelis. The department in Durban, at the Durban-Westville University, was established for Indian students as part of 'Education Own Affairs' policy. So the proposition that UNISA could step into the Soweto vacuum became a way in which urban-based artists in Soweto could do a degree programme.

The idea was to set up a school at Funda where artists could come and register for UNISA but also be on a full-time campus because it would have been impossible for them to study part time, the way other students were studying. They would not have

had space at their homes to make art. So that's the background to it. So Matsemela and I… just remember at the time there was a cultural boycott, a time of disinvestment by major corporations. Matsemela's interest was within performing arts, theatre and the visual arts and in fact Matsemela registered in that first year for the UNISA Fine Art degree. I think he was pretty appalled at how Eurocentric it all was. Matsemela chose to stay in Soweto and to try and make things happen in the 'cracks of apartheid', a term used by Bill Ainslie to describe the world we inhabited.

So the two of us go and see Christopher Till because Christopher is looking for some advice and because Christopher wants to do something about the absence of black artists in the Johannesburg Art Gallery but he doesn't say as much. He engages with us, indicates that there is nothing predetermined… we are just sitting around the table and talking, and out of the discussion we agree that what Christopher should do is an exhibition on black South African art. Now just prior to that Matsemela had worked with the daughter of the then French Ambassador, because she was studying at the Sorbonne in France and she was doing her Master's and she wanted to do her Master's on black South African art. There was little or no research available and Matsemela worked with her, assisted her. So these were some of the earlier threads of how one would start to deal with the subject matter… Matsemela had started to work on a black art history. We have this meeting with Christopher and we then agree with him that they are going to do an exhibition on black South African art and we leave and we go and we carry on with our lives.

I was between UNISA and the African Institute of Art, and was seconded to Funda for two years before I returned and continued to lecture at UNISA.

Shortly before the Johannesburg Art Gallery black art exhibition was meant to launch, I get a call from Christopher. Will I curate the show? I have three months… can I do it? I did a rapid runaround talking to various people… should I do this… will it be in conflict with the cultural boycott? Everyone except one person said I should do it and so *The Neglected Tradition* happened, at breakneck speed, with help from the most capable team who were named earlier. So in three months this exhibition was put together. I knew that I could do it because I had grown up with art my whole life,

right from the 1960s, the late 1960s, already there was a meeting of black and white artists obviously at Dorkay House and at the Goodman Gallery, even at the Association of Arts in Pretoria. Their gallery was in Pretoria, in Church Square. You could go in the 1970s to an exhibition opening and there were black artists looking for ways to enter this white-dominated world. The two major discoveries for me, and critical aids to the exhibition project, were the Tim Couzen's book *The New African* [1985] and the remarkable Killie Campbell Collections in Durban.

**SM**: I am also just interested in how, going back to *The Neglected Tradition* I mean, you initially started it as and you say that in the catalogue as well, that it started as a catalyst.

**SS**: Yes.

**SM**: I tried to look at other exhibitions that followed after that; notably there was *Ten Years of Collecting* and *Images of Wood* where there was a pattern of these artists appearing.

**SS**: When they were incorporated?

**SM**: Yes, and where they reappear again, but I don't know if there was another exhibition like *The Neglected Tradition* that aimed at addressing the same issues?

**SS**: In fact, about two or three years ago I thought that I would finally come back to Wits and finally do the MA that I've never done and it was exactly that paragraph of *The Neglected Tradition*, that talks about how the exhibition was intended as a catalyst towards more detailed research. I started gathering all the literature on all the exhibitions, I started doing that myself in terms of what happened after *The Neglected Tradition* and for the first time actually I realised with doing all of this work I never actually read it and I sort of discovered that most of the writing continued to be written by white academics and researchers. Elza Miles, who has made an enormous contribution to scholarship in this field, writes with a particular approach to art… and

I often find myself asking about where interpretation and fact begin and end. There is obviously a lot of solid research and some very good writing that helps to close the many gaps in the recording of art by black and white South Africans in the 19th and 20th centuries.

**SM**: I found Ivor Powell's writing during that time quite interesting.

**SS**: Yes, Ivor was a great loss to the profession. He lectured at UNISA when I was there and the other person who wrote well was Marion Arnold but from a very different perspective.

The point is that, given the fact that you are doing the work, so probably what should happen is that you and I should collaborate in half of this work because I just don't have the time but I have a real interest in the sort of revisiting and trying to understand, trying to unpack what it is that happened because I think one of the important things for me always about *The Neglected Tradition* is that it included white artists and it only included them because they were essential to the story, that you couldn't tell the story without including them. The point of it also is that extraordinary fact that the visual arts, that art making, was despite the demeaning experience that many black artists had, I mean I remember the story about Mohl, Koenakeefe Mohl who went to Wits Technikon (now University of Johannesburg) and they invited him to draw but he had to stand outside the door and look through the door at the model, I don't know if you have ever picked up that reference?

Somebody like Nic Maritz, who acquired this huge collection — he was one of the first to begin to collect black art, immediately after *The Neglected Tradition.* He went and bought up the artists of *The Neglected Tradition.* He became like the major collector and then he sold that collection and started focusing on what I call the classical, traditional and I seem to remember that his expectation was that the person that would be buying this collection from him would be a black South African! The fact that this hasn't happened and people don't seem to understand, that my view of it is that, how could you feel comfortable knowing that Pemba died destitute and that you would now go, as a black entrepreneur and invest R20 million rand in a Pemba

collection, and hang that on your wall. I mean you would have to be a very crass kind of person to do something like that and to not ask the question, 'What happened to Pemba?' Because late in his life things could have been different for him, already because after *The Neglected Tradition,* Everard Read did a huge exhibition on Pemba and they already started selling the work for him at exponentially higher prices. I actually think we need to look also to government in this respect — because national government should have done something about the legacy of all of these artists. If you investigate how every one of them — Sihlali, and the fight about the legacy; Dumile, they managed to sort out his legacy in the end, and they had Albie Sachs and others to try and iron it out all the problems… you know, the stuff that's now going on with Mandela. In some cases the families squabble… this is what happens and the state could have stepped in, it could have intervened and could have done something to ensure that people were protected so that in Pemba's case immediately post 1988 there could have been something done to ensure that there was a proper kind of foundation set up for Pemba while he was still alive, and I mean none of these things, are going to get done again… history is just going to move on and some may be remembered and others will face a new 'neglect'.

Look, hopefully now most of the artists are better organised, more empowered. I don't think that David Koloane, or Sam Nhlengethwa need anybody to act on their behalf. The great Gibson Kente, same story, you can just count it over and over again, there is this huge problem that happens, after artists have departed and so in a way it's kind of tainted, it's still all tainted and maybe that's part of the problem of it being embraced. I think one of the things they should do, as is done in France, when artwork goes on auction and is sold on auction, a percentage of the price achieved on the auction should go back to the artist or to the artist's estate. They should have that here in this country so that when they sell a Sekoto for R3 million that 4%, I mean it's a tiny amount, should go into the foundation and be used to educate other artists or support the artist's dependents.

**SM**: I think I got a good sense of all the information.

## GLOSSARY

| | |
|---|---|
| African | Refers to the continent and in this thesis prefaces a geographical locale within which the contextual framework is situated. |
| African art | While the term itself is subject to debate the notion of African art, is used to describe art produced both within and outside the continent. |
| Art | Art is used to describe any creative product produced for the purpose of contemplation or aesthetic appeal. |
| Black art | This term is used with reference to the South African context and is used to describe art produced by the black people of South Africa. When described politically, it refers to a new form of expression addressing the need for a voice for black artists. |
| Contemporary art | Contemporary art describe art produced at the present period in time and is in this thesis used to make a distinction from traditional classical art. |
| Craft | Craft was initially used to describe the work produced by artists discussed in this thesis. It has since been reconsidered as pejorative because of its negative connotations as an inferior art form. |
| Cross cultural | The idea of culture is briefly discussed in the thesis to illustrate its complexities in the South African context. Here it is made with reference to the case studies of the exhibitions and how they incorporated different artists from different cultural backgrounds. |
| Fine art | In this thesis the term is used to refer to predominately a western understanding of art where visual art is considered for both its aesthetic and intellectual status. |
| High art | High art refers to art held in the highest esteem in visual culture, where class and social status provide the coherent and conscious aesthetic of value in what is considered as art. |
| Multicultural | Consisting of many different cultures |
| Rural | There are two uses of rural in the thesis. The first problematizes the term in relation to its use with a particular group of artists. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | The second is its use as a terminology to describe particular way of thinking about art made outside the conventional framework od western art. |
| Urban | Working within the urban setting of the city or an urbanized space. It is here associated with western art modes and practice. |

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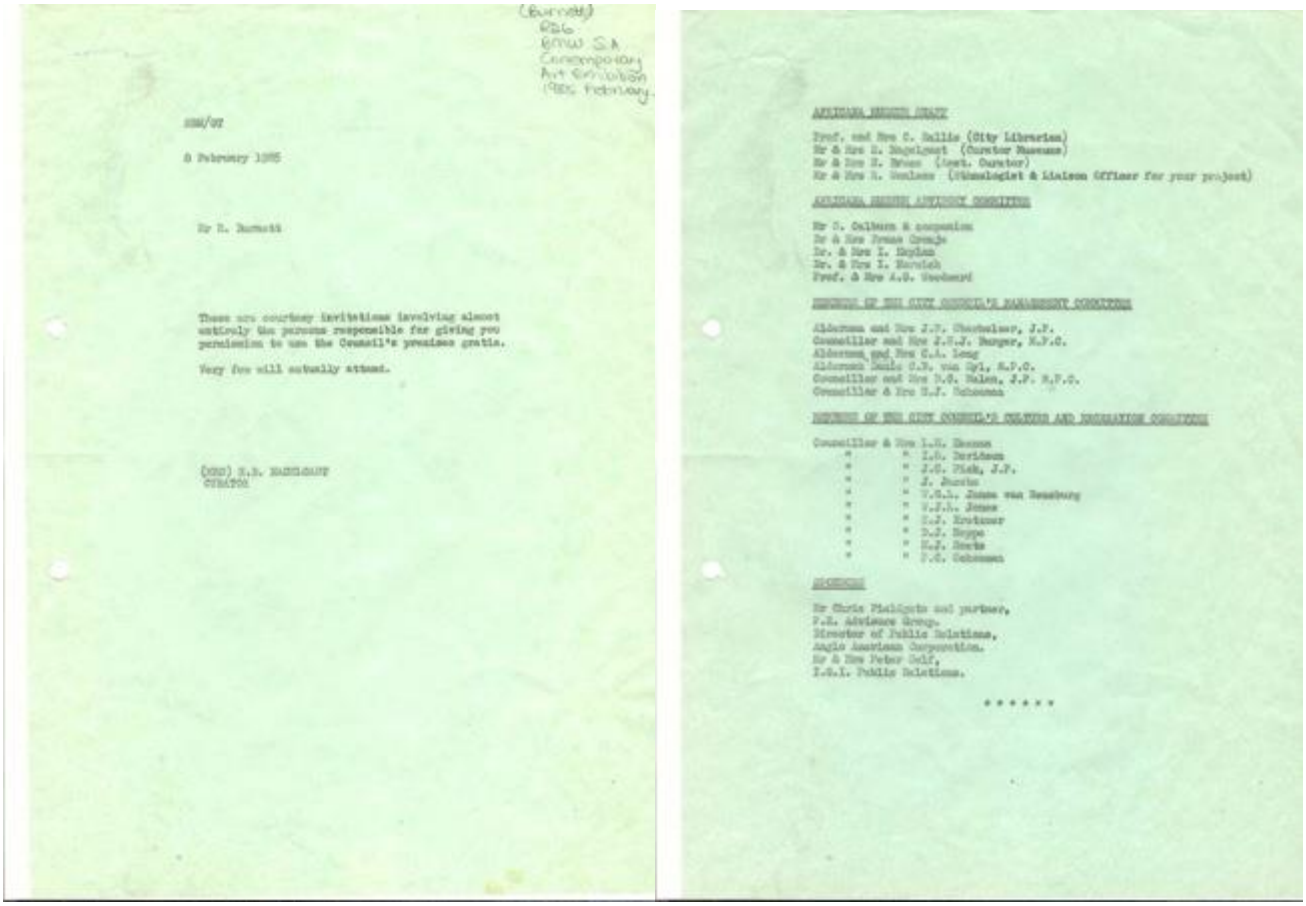

(Burnett)
RSG
BMW S.A.
Contemporary
Art Exhibition
1985 February

[illegible]/07

8 February 1985

Mr R. Burnett

These are courtesy invitations involving almost entirely the persons responsible for giving you permission to use the Council's premises gratis.

Very few will actually attend.

(MRS) E.B. NAGELGAST
CURATOR

AFRICANA MUSEUM STAFF

Prof. and Mrs C. Sallis (City Librarian)
Mr & Mrs E. Nagelgast (Curator Museums)
Mr & Mrs H. Brass (Asst. Curator)
Mr & Mrs R. Woolsey (Ethnologist & Liaison Officer for your project)

AFRICANA MUSEUM ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Dr & Mrs Frans Greyje
Dr. & Mrs I. Kaplan
Dr. & Mrs I. Marwick
Prof. & Mrs A.G. Woodward

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" " I.G. Davidson
" " J.C. Fick, J.P.
" " J. Jurcke
" " W.G.L. Jones van Heusburg
" " W.J.L. Jones
" " E.J. Kretzmer
" " D.J. Hoppe
" " H.J. Roets
" " P.C. Schoeman

APOLOGIES

Mr Chris Pfaldgate and partner,
P.R. Advisors Group.
Director of Public Relations,
Anglo American Corporation.
Mr & Mrs Peter Self,
I.G.I. Public Relations.

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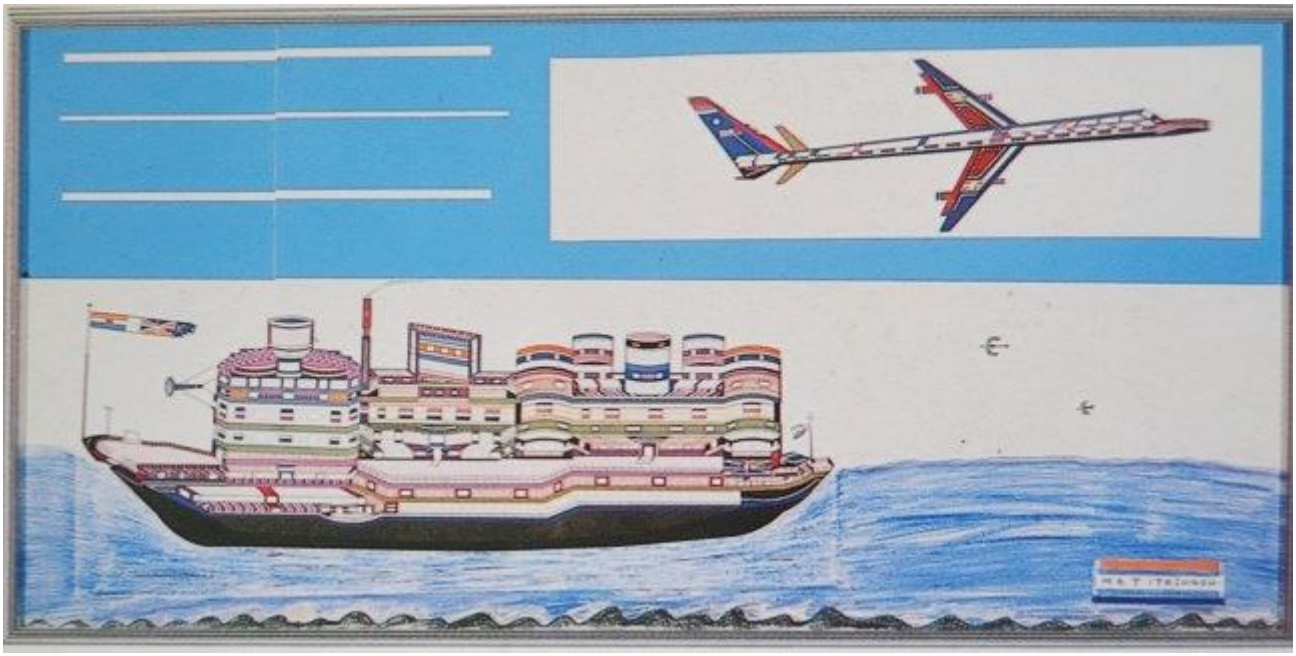

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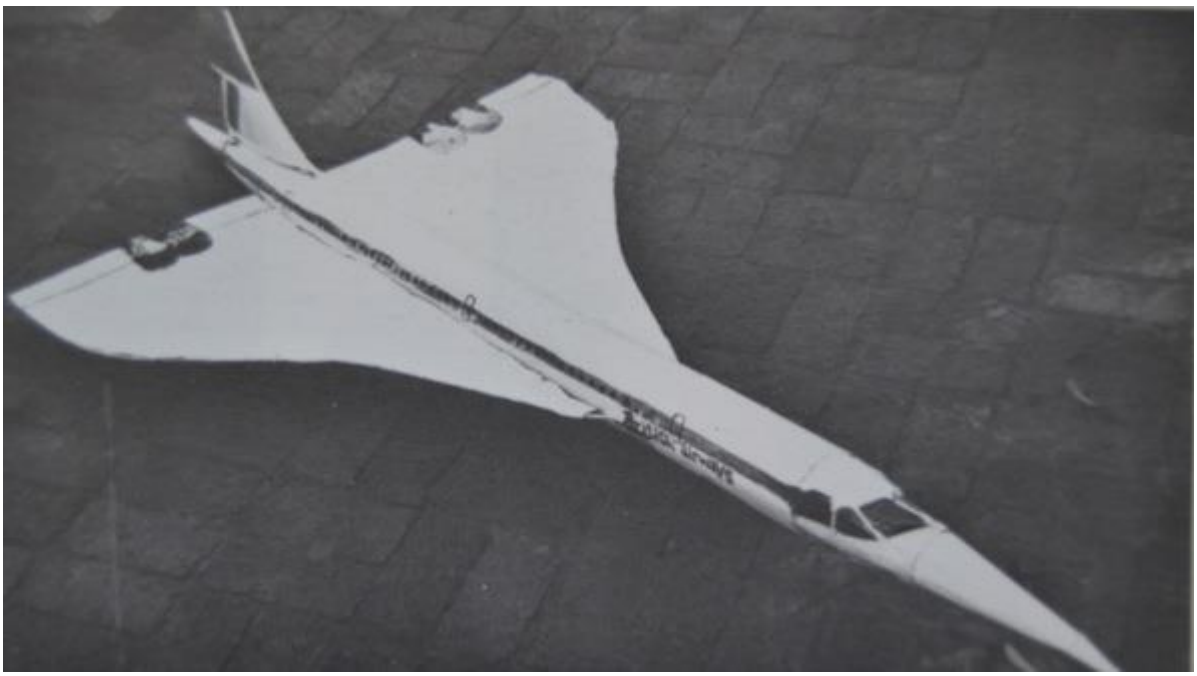

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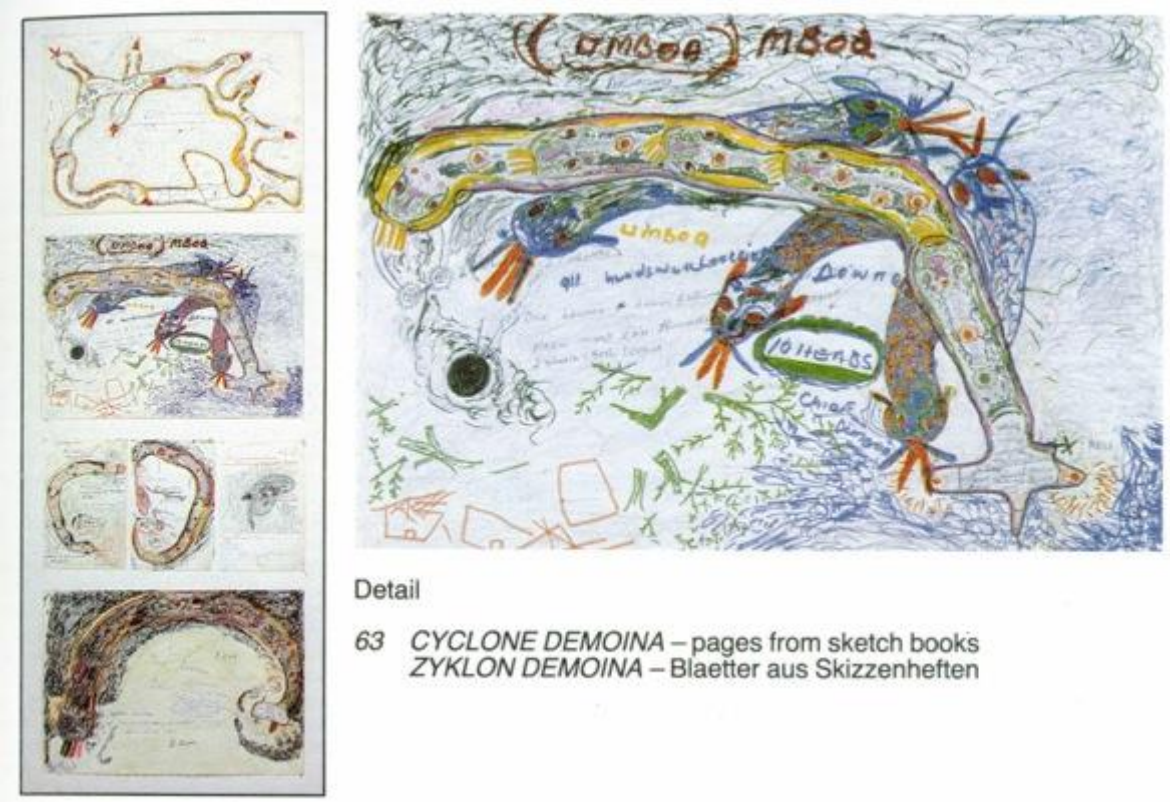


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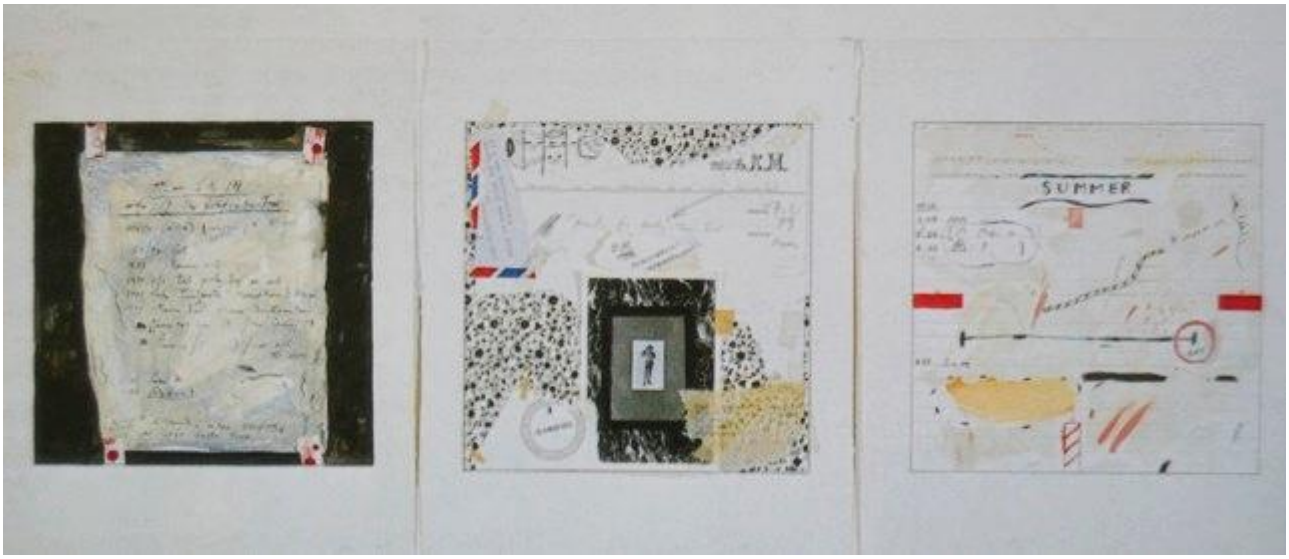


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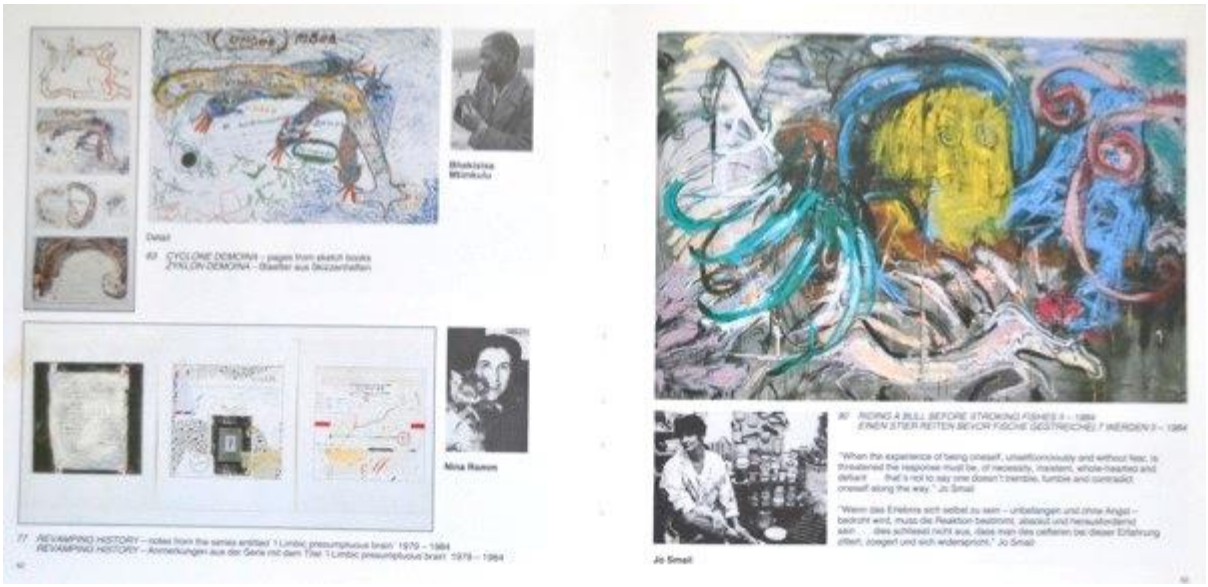

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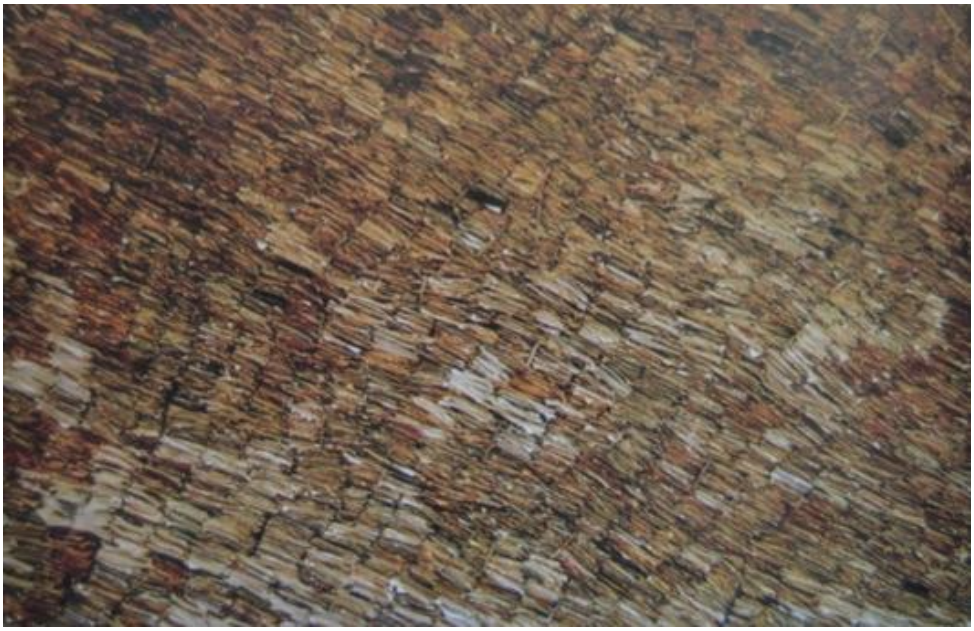

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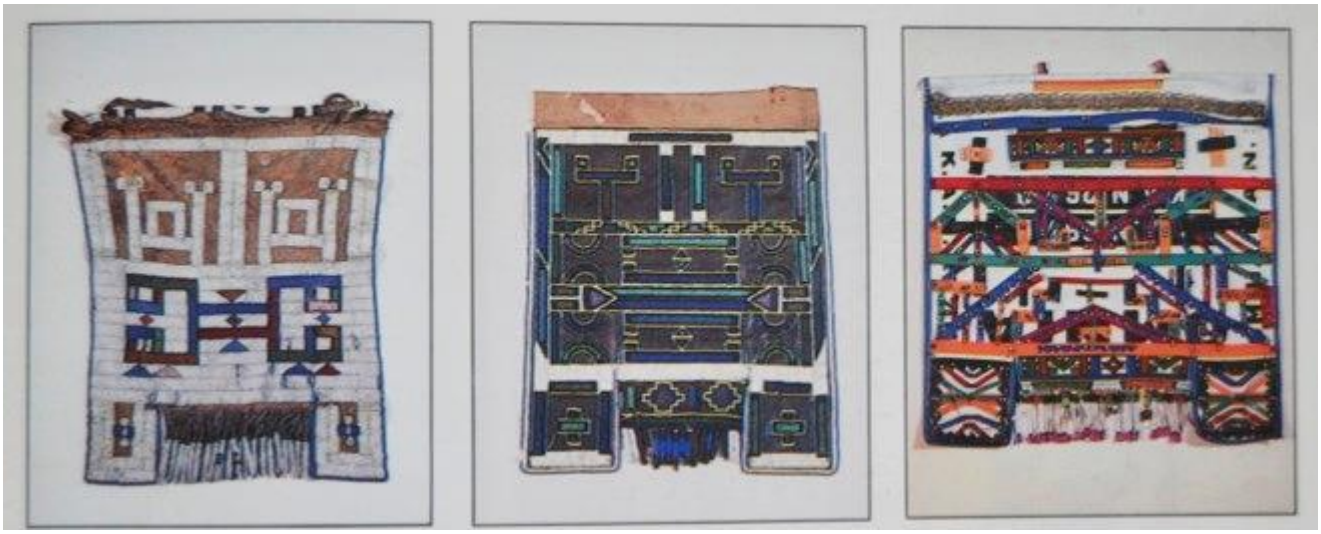

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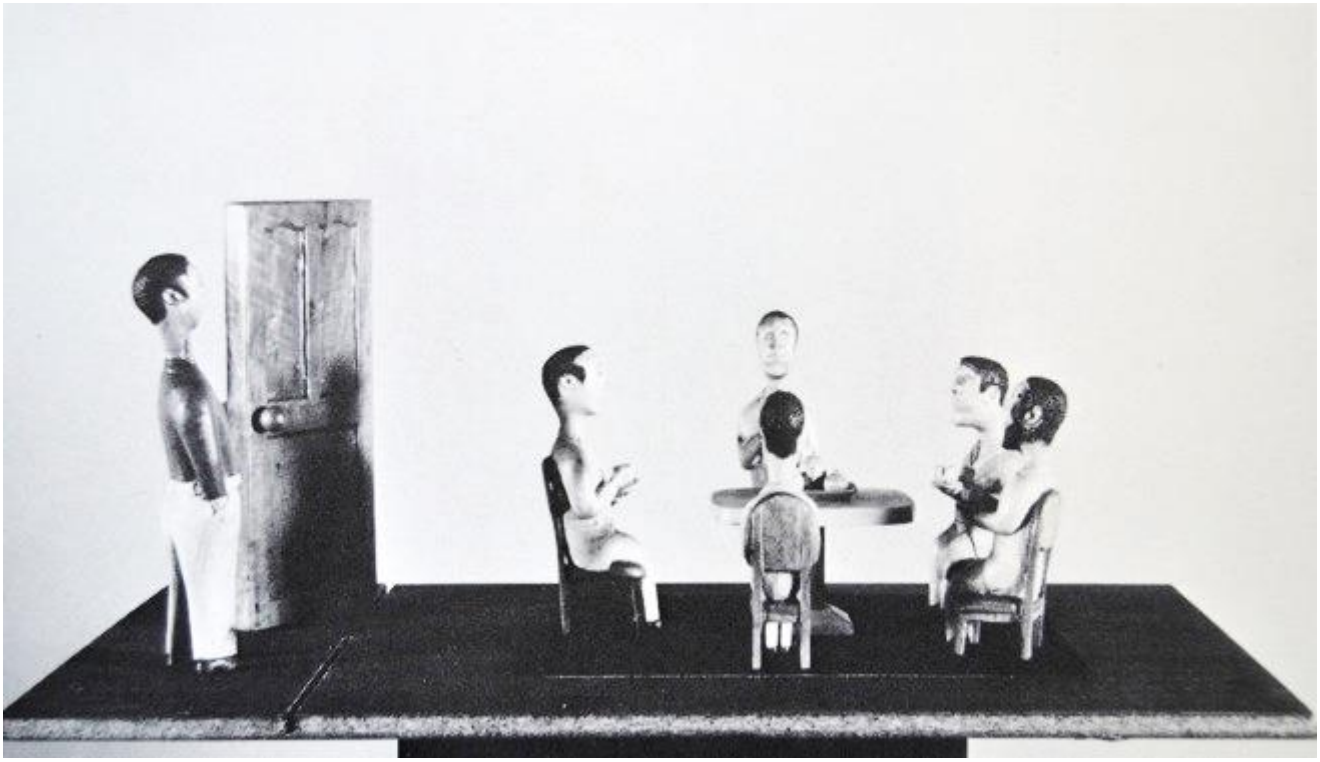

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**Figure 27.** Johannes Segogela, *History Press*, 1994, Acrylic on wood, 'A Decade of Democracy: South African Art 1994–2004 from the Permanent Collection of Iziko: South African National Gallery' at Iziko: South African National Gallery, Cape Town from April to August 2004, p. 42.



**Figure 28.** Johannes Segogela, *Nebuchadnezzar*, wood, paint, twigs, 26.8 x 23.5 x 6.5, South African National Gallery, Sack, S. 1989. *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art*, exhibition catalogue, Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery, p. 84.



**Figure 29.** Johannes Segogela, *Table with four believers*, wood, oil paint, Figure (A): 13 x 18.5 x 21, Figure (B): 14 x 6 x 8, Figure (C): 15 x 6.5 x 7, Figure (D): 18.5 x 6 x 6, Figure (E): 15.5 x 5 x 5.5, Wits Art Museum (formally Wits University Art Galleries) collection, Sack, S. 1989. *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art*, exhibition catalogue, Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery, p. 84.



**Figure 30.** Johannes Segogela, Nkosi Sikelela (Bafana Bafana), Arts and Craft Map guide for Gauteng Province, 1998.

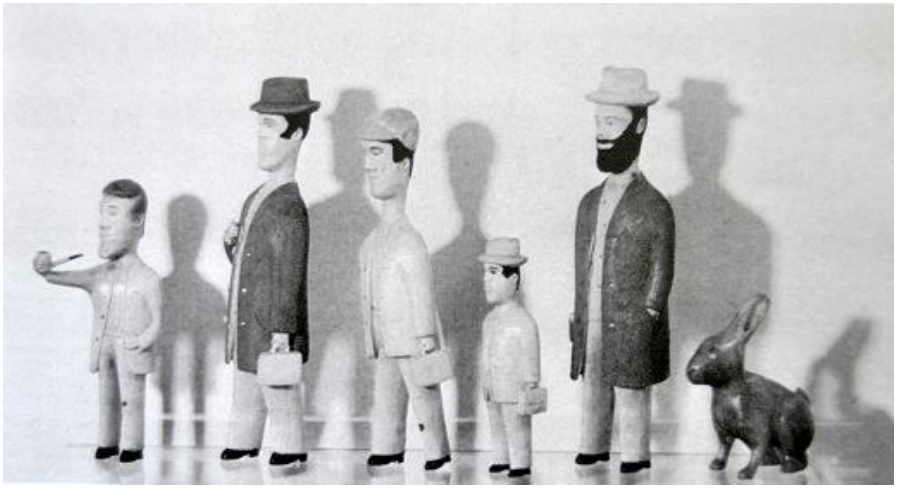


**Figure 31.** Johannes Segogela, *Onlookers*, Art 34 Basel, exhibition catalogue. 18 -1 23 June 2003, Switzerland: Art Basel.



**Figure 32.** Noria Mabasa, *Carnage (II Natal flood disaster)*, 1988, Wood (length 240), Collection of William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley, Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation. 1988. *The Cape Town Triennial* 1988, exhibition catalogue, Cape Town: Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation, p. 67.



**Figure 33.** Noria Mabasa, *Clergyman*, Clay, oil paint 60 x 26.5 x 28.5 cm Wits Art Museum, Sack, S. 1989. *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art*, exhibition catalogue, Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery, p. 53.



**Figure 34.** Jackson Hlungwani, Khoti (vulture), Wood (height 108), Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation. 1988. *The Cape Town Triennial* 1988, exhibition catalogue, Cape Town: Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation, p 40.

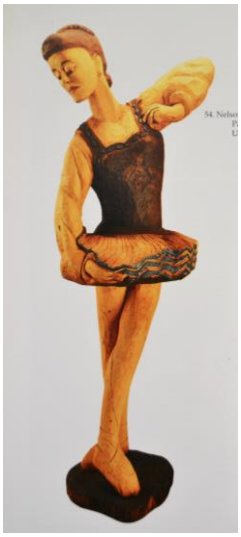


**Figure 35.** Nelson Mukhuba, *Ballet dancer*, 1974, wood, pigment. (height 118), Hammond-Tooke, d. & Nettleton, A. (eds) 1989. *Ten years of collecting (1979–1989)*. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand. p 79.



**Figure 36.** Gazland Hlungwani, *Dancing man*, 1991, Cape Town Triennial 1991 catalogue, Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation, p 59.

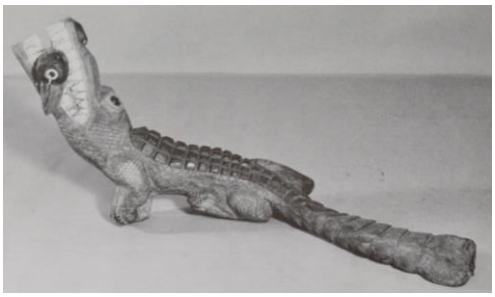


**Figure 37.** Goldwin Ndou, *Crocodile eating flamingo*, 1990, Cape Town Triennial 1991 catalogue, Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation, p 77.



**Figure 38.** Owen Ndou, *Hunter with mountain snake*, 1991, Cape Town Triennial 1991 catalogue, Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation, p 77.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT FORM

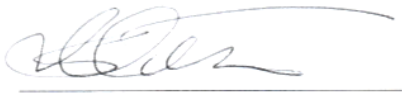
**INTERVIEW**
**Ricky Burnett**
**Curator**
***Tributaries: A view of contemporary South African Art***
**30 May 2012**
**Ricky Burnett Studio, Rosebank**

Interviewee:

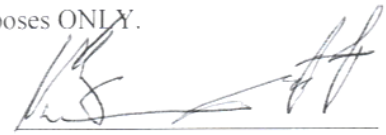
I  (Interviewee) hereby declare that the information provided is an accurate account of the events described and discussed in this interview.

Interviewer:

I SAME MDLULI (Interviewer) hereby declare that the following information will be used for research purposes ONLY.



Interviewer Signature



Interviewee Signature

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**INTERVIEW**
**Steven Sack**
**Curator**
***The Neglected Tradition: towards a New History of South African Art***
**21 May 2013**
**Origin Centre, Wits University, Johannesburg**

Interviewee:

I STEVEN SACK (Interviewee) hereby declare that the information provided is an accurate account of the events described and discussed in this interview.

Interviewer:

I SAME MDLULI (Interviewer) hereby declare that the following information will be used for research purposes ONLY.

Interviewer Signature

Interviewee Signature

**UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG**

**HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON MEDICAL)**
Same Mdluli

| | |
|---|---|
| **CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE** | **PROTOCOL NUMBER: WSOA120302** |
| **PROJECT** | From State of Emergency to Democracy: Revisiting exhibitions of South African Art held in South Africa between 1984 and 1994 |
| **INVESTIGATORS** | Same Mdluli |
| **DEPARTMENT** | Wits School of Arts |
| **DATE CONSIDERED** | 20.03.2012 |
| **DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE** | Approved |

**Unless otherwise specified this ethical clearance is valid for 2 years and may be renewed upon application**

**DATE** 18.04.2012 **CHAIRPERSON** .....
(Prof. Cynthia Kros)

cc: Supervisor : Prof. Anitra Nettleton

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**DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)**

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Secretary at Room 10005, 10th Floor, Senate House, University.

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee. **I agree to a completion of a yearly progress report.**

**Signature**

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES