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A monkey's wedding: carnival impulses in the work of emerging South African artists: Michael MacGarry, Nandipha Mntambo, Themba Shibase, Nina Barnett and Robyn Nesbitt

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CHAPTER ONE –

BAKHTINIAN THOUGHT AND THE PICTURING OF A VULGAR AFRICAN IDENTITY

1.1 Introduction

My research sets forth in response to Achille Mbembe's redeployment of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque in the agenda-setting essay "The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony".[1] It hopes to offer an extended application of Bakhtin's critical methods, as a means of considering the remarkable suitability of carnivalesque imagery to current art practice addressing the somewhat overtraded subject of cultural identity in postcolonial South Africa. Can the carnivalesque work of art be considered socially influential with real subversive agency or is it, as Mbembe advises, merely an example of the necessary cathartic ventilators we use to release repressed energies? As a deliberately broad model for other postcolonial African countries, Mbembe writes of Cameroon:

> The postcolony is characterised by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion, as well as by distinctive ways identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation (2001:103).

It is with the critical considerations outlined in this statement that I turn my attention to the mating of political science and cultural studies within certain instances of contemporary fine art production in South Africa. Rising artists, Michael MacGarry, Nandipha Mntambo, Themba Shibase, Nina Barnett and Robyn Nesbitt have been selected for the combination of their carnivalesque approach and deliberately angular views relating to the subject of (South) African cultural identity. The same artists were invited to participate in the practical component of my research – a group exhibition curated for an

[1] "The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony", first published as *Provisional Notes on the Postcolony* in 1992, illustrates the African country as trying to reconceptualise itself after years of violent colonial domination. Most relevant to my research is Mbembe's use of literary sources to interpret the spectacle of the postcolonial government that commands its subjects to participate in various displays of absurd power. With Cameroon as his case study, Mbembe employs Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to explore these issues of power. In his findings surrounding subjectivity and the body, he attributes the divine libido, utopia and death as instrumental to the constitution of this power. He considers violence, laughter and wonder, as records of bodily subjectivity that challenge those categories of oppression and resistance, autonomy and subjection, and state and civil society that characterised the social theory of the late twentieth century in Africa.

By demonstrating why and how the "zombification" of the dominant and dominated has deprived the both of any ability to have an impact, Mbembe argues that the African is essentially an object of experimentation (2001:104). He also posits the idea of interpreting time as subjectivity *in the postcolony* and the notion of identity self-fashioning, as a means to explore the thematics of a new meta-narrative of contemporary African postcolonial life, which would be able to come to terms with Africa's history of violence and suffering. Thus, one can understand Mbembe's intellectual project to be a search for a meta-narrative from which Africa might begin to recover its pasts and therefore its futures within world history.

American audience that similarly interrogates identity politics via the parameters of the carnivalesque and related taboo mechanisms. *The New Spell* was on exhibition from 5 June to 30 July 2008 at David Krut Projects, New York and included works by the aforementioned artists ranging in media from painting and photography to sculpture and video. Curatorially, my aim was to treat the carnivalesque as a mode of activist practice, exploring both its principles of spectacle and pleasure. Both the selection of artworks and the exhibition design of *The New Spell* will also be considered as spectacular or carnivalesque phenomena in themselves.

Throughout the 1990's many curators in South Africa took on enunciating the relationship between memory and history, where in the context of post-apartheid artistic production, memory became deeply associated with the act of mourning. As a result, the intellectual current of late twentieth century South African art was dominated by, first the struggle against apartheid and the country's resultant cultural isolationism and then, after institutional apartheid's demise, the struggle to create and develop a South African cultural and aesthetic identity. For example, shortly after the 1994 democratic elections, local exhibitions such as *Fault Lines*, 1996, Castle, Cape Town and *District Six Public Sculpture Project (DSPSP)*, Cape Town, 1997, critically explored the relationship between history, memory and representation. These sorts of exhibitions paralleled the processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (T.R.C) in foregrounding the role of art in dealing with the history and memory of apartheid South Africa.[2] During this period many local artists became visible in the international art scene and bearing witness to the dark years of apartheid became common for work seeking admittance into exhibition possibilities overseas. A crucial development after the liberation of the country post 1994 was the new interface between the continent and the global world after years of isolation.[3] This brought with it a shift in creativity and a focus on questions of new subjects, media and processes for artists to express themselves in. More idiosyncratic and individually driven creativity came to the fore as a consequence and over the last fifteen years, South African group exhibitions abroad have

[2] The TRC was a committee arranged in April 1996 to hold hearings, which dealt with apartheid crimes with a view to establishing the necessary reparation and rehabilitation for victims and granting amnesty to violators. Made up of seventeen members, the TRC was given the task of providing a public platform for the recounting of all aspects of apartheid crimes and political violence committed after March 1960. The TRC's duty was to provide mechanisms, criteria and procedures for granting amnesty to political human rights violations, and also to formulate a policy for reparation, to restore, rehabilitate and heal the victims' survivors. The hearings were documented and archived and the findings of the Commission were published and further interrogated (Engelberg, 2000:2).

[3] This (cultural) isolationalism was due largely to the economic sanctions placed on South Africa by many of its international trading partners as an effective way of putting pressure on the apartheid government. In 1962, the United Nations General Assembly requested that its members sever all political, fiscal and transportation ties with South Africa. In 1968, it proposed ending all cultural, educational and sporting connections as well. In 1978 and 1983 the UN condemned South Africa at the World Conference Against Racism, and a significant divestment movement started, pressuring investors to disinvest from South African companies or companies that had previously done business with South Africa.

After much debate, by the late 1980s the United States, the United Kingdom, and 23 other nations had passed laws placing various trade sanctions on South Africa. A divestment movement in many countries was similarly widespread, with individual cities and provinces around the world implementing various laws and local regulations forbidding registered corporations under their jurisdiction from doing business with South African firms, factories, or banks.(Source: http://www.mehr.org/Sanction_south_africa.pdf).

demonstrated a distinct shift in an attempt to showcase work that is more personal in experience and therefore more universal in understanding.

Exchanges also addressed the local/global interface and consequently, what exhibitions such as *New Identities*, 2004 in Bochum, Germany, *The ID of South African Artists*, 2004, Amsterdam; *A Decade of Democracy: Witnessing South Africa*, 2004 – 2005, Boston; *Personal Affects, Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, 2004, New York and *Min(e)dfields*, 2004, Berne, Switzerland share in perspective is the intention to use highly personal means of expression to examine ways in which identity has been defined in Africa. Much of this discourse has centered on the anxiety of difference whereby artists respond in different ways to questions of power.

In discussing the potential for an avant-garde movement in South Africa, Sean O'Toole elaborates on the subsequent overtrading of identity politics resulting in an art history characterised by an anxiety of influence concerning only its local impact, separated from many of the international art movements:

> Given the clarity and urgency of such an oppositional political agenda most forms of art and artistic practice were pressured to become reflectionist, to adopt an ideological stance that made allegiances clear. Such literalism is anathema to the category of the aesthetic, and much more so to the agenda the avant-garde, which calls such terms into question in the first place. That is, as was well evidenced by the rash of "decade of democracy" exhibitions in 2004, we tend to fall back on identity politics in order to make sense of a burgeoning experimentalism with medium, form and idea, a possibly fruitful hybridisation and individualisation of the concept of South African art. Nowhere was this clearer than in the resurfacing of essentialised and shambolic debates about racial representation and power structures in art institutions at the recent Session eKapa 2005, a forum convened in the run up to a new biennial exhibition later this year. Though the possibility of a new global avant-garde may be remote, primarily because of the nature of global mediation and information capitalism, as a country South Africa needs to look beyond such elementary binaries – not in order to establish a national character for South African art necessarily, but in order to allow for broader terms of debate and parameters for creative work (2006:23).

Foregrounding identity as complex and multiple in contrast to the apartheid era that policed identity in closed off categories has been a crucial process, but it is in this respect that this research and its resultant exhibition *The New Spell* wishes to distinguish itself. With a liberated sense of detachment and satiric self-reflexivity, many of the works included on the exhibition present themselves in opposition towards the subject of identity in Africa, reminding the viewer that the postcolonial artist or critic may even at times be a laughing one.[4] The exhibition takes the temperament of South Africa today through the eyes

[4] Artists MacGarry and Shibase, for example, teasingly subvert the notion of personal identity by grafting fictional identity crises onto their contemporary subjects in works such as *Tipp-Ex Politics* (2008) by MacGarry and *Wena*

of five artists. Each artist probes the body politic at a different point and derives an individual reading. Set in dialogue not only with Bakhtin, but also with Mbembe's dystopian vision of a postcolonial grotesque, the selected works function in alerting the viewer to a kind of productive estrangement and progressive critique that can result from a carnivalesque inversion of ideas.

1.2 Curatorial Orientation

Of the numerous critical engagements with Mbembe's carnivalesque as it relates to Bakhtin's model, Rita Barnard's essay "On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda's Ways of Dying" (2004), poignantly substantiates many of the congruencies I find thematically prevalent within instances of emerging South African art. Examining Mda's novel *Ways of Dying* (1995), Barnard describes Bahktin's study of the carnivalesque as fundamentally a meditation on the fate of laughter – a lament, in fact, for its "diminishing power and shrinking gifts" in the age of the bourgeoisie (Emerson and Morson, as quoted by Barnard, 2004:10).[5] Mbembe's implicit history of postcolonial laughter, in contrast, is an emphatically more sinister one. Whilst he acknowledges that humour needn't always be necessarily subversive, he doubts its capacity to perform such a role at all. His concern is that laughter has become just another "token in the symbolic games that the powerful play with their underlings". Hence, it assumes the quality of a symbolic scavenging, "people who laugh," Mbembe declares, "are only reading the signs left like rubbish in the wake of the commandment" (Mbembe, as quoted by Barnard, 2004:10).

Although not all overtly humorous in effect, most of the works selected for discussion and or inclusion in *The New Spell* can be described as Janus-faced in their ability to exemplify both fates of laughter described above. With satiric self-reflexivity, there is evidence of both an optimistic post-apartheid vision, and an acute awareness for the extent of a growing public disillusionment. Because of this awareness, cited by Barnard of what Loren Kruger has termed the "future imperfect" of national liberation in Africa, I propose that these artworks achieve something of the task Ato Quayson proposes for the postcolonial critic. They compel us to contemplate one of the most striking thresholds of our recent history – the demise of apartheid and its aftereffects – in an adventurous and carnivalesque fashion, and as part of an ongoing and far from straightforward process of decolonisation (Barnard, 2004:4).

Wendlovu (2007) by Shibase. The process of identity formation, resulting from the experience of an identity crisis, has been the topic of much creative investigation and interpretation for many South African artists. Here personal identity refers to a sense of sameness or continuity of the self despite environmental changes and individual growth. An 'identity crisis' is experienced by an individual if environmental changes threaten the continuity of personal identity, forcing the individual into a new identity formation: the restructuring of all previous identifications in the light of the anticipated future (Badenhorst-Roux, 2006:2).

[5] With the "Professional Mourner" Toloki as its protagonist, Mda's novel is set during the final days of apartheid's demise. Toloki wanders in wretched wonder from township funeral to township funeral. From a surprisingly eccentric and whimsical perspective the reader is offered accounts of the endemic violence that surrounds Toloki, as well as glimpses of the potential elitism and corruption on the horizon of new leadership.

Correspondingly, the title of my research paper is borrowed from Barnard's recitation of Chris Van Wyk's comic novel *The Year of The Tapeworm* (1996). On the subject of the South African transition, Van Wyk suggests a replacement of the popular "rainbow nation" phrase with the less banal and more ambivalent "monkeys' wedding" or "Umshado weZinkawu" (the expression people use when it rains and shines at the same time).[6] It is in this crucial respect of productive ambivalence that the artworks selected for discussion are entirely congruous with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque vision. Sharing in this collective worldview of the carnivalesque, the works featured in *The New Spell*, along with further examples by each of the artists, can be distinguished by their varying uses of carnivalesque critical methods. Outlined by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, these include subverting social hierarchies, parody and satire, masquerade, grotesque realism and reinvention (1984:26). I engage these carnivalesque traits amongst a range of themes of broader focus explored by the selected works namely, positive estrangement; African excess; Mbembe's vulgate; the beautiful and ugly; and laughter and catharsis.

In doing so, I acknowledge that deploying Bakhtin's framework of the carnivalesque is somewhat thorny in an African context, especially when one considers the loose ways in which the term is often used. 'Carnivalesque' is regularly used as a vaguely approving term to describe unruly or disruptive sorts of behaviour. However, beyond this rudimentary understanding of term, one also invites criticism for applying a literary concept – with its own European history of subjugation and oppression – to a real and uniquely African situation. Barnard's response to an equivalent indictment is that literary theories are just as capable as "any other cultural artifacts of being refashioned in new contexts", and in Bakhtin's case we already have the example of Mbembe, whose ideas about the fate of laughter in Africa are clearly exemplified in the works I have selected for discussion (2004:5). In writing about the carnivalesque in relation to an African art practice, it is therefore my objective to offer both a greater exploration of the term itself and an alternative framework for considering works that engage the intangible notion of contemporary cultural identity.

Originating in the Dionysian festivals of the Ancient Greeks, we have appropriated the word 'carnival' in reference to pre-Lent celebrations held in places such as New Orleans, Louisiana and Rio De Janeiro,

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[6] Archbishop Desmond Tutu coined the phrase "the Rainbow Nation" just prior to the1994 elections. The phrase was understood to promote a particularly homogenous idea of what it means to be South African in the 'new' South Africa. In his essay for the curated exhibition *Graft* on the second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997, Colin Richards observes:

> The rainbow is at the very least a double-edged metaphor. A cynical pragmatic reader might see less promise than mystification in a myth laden but literally fragile figure […] an ephemeral phenomenon of mundane light fractured by rain. […] Whatever else, a rainbow is a shared hallucination, requiring only that we have the setting sun behind the mist in front of us (Richards as quoted by Waldman, 2003:8).

In her research report, *Patinas of Perfection: Representations of identity and nationhood in contemporary South Africa*, Gina Waldman contends that "Rainbow Nation" rhetoric implies and constructs a kind of "smokescreen of positivism that covers over unpleasant realities that are otherwise perhaps too difficult to deal with". With the idea of a nation of "shiny, happy people" that will forget the trauma of the past in order to move forward to future opportunities, the notion of historical amnesia is brought to bear (2003:9).

Brazil. In Ancient Greece the medieval carnival provided not only a respite from work, but the opportunity to challenge societal norms – a brief period of revelry that traditionally involved actions and images representing "the world upside-down", with fools crowned as kings or donkeys consecrated as priests (Haynes, 1995:103).[7]

> The kind of time peculiar to carnival is the release from time, a respite from the relatively closed and rigid historical patterns that dominant ideologies impose on time's flux. But this freedom cannot be understood merely as playing hooky from the norms of non-carnivalised life at any particular point in history. The physical experience of carnival expresses not just negative escapism but has a positive aspect as well. Carnival is not time wasted but time filled with profound and rich experience (Clark and Holquist, 1984: 302)

Given voice in the work of medieval writer Francois Rabelais, and theorised later by Bakhtin in his study, *Rabelais and His World* (1968), carnivalesque was appropriated into a literary and fine arts tradition in the sixteenth century. From a social realist literary tradition, Bakhtin interpreted the carnivalesque as the voice of the people, as the vehicle of self-expression for the usually suppressed and regulated proletariat (Connelly, 2003:8). According to Bakhtin, the carnival involved a temporary suspension of all hierarchies coupled with joyous, uninhibited celebration of the breaking of social norms, mocking authority and parodying official ideas and standards. As the power structures broke down during carnival a new type of communication developed among people who could not usually unite as a community. Distinct individual voices were heard and interacted together, creating

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[7] The ancient Greeks held an annual festival in honour of the rebirth of Dionysus, the god of wine. Dionysus was loved not only because he brought wine to the people, but also because he represented rebellion against all rational culture. The Festival of Dionysus was a time for the oppressed to delight in mortal sensory pleasures. In opposition to Pentheus, who was the epitome of rational, traditional and cultured conventions, Dionysus represented the anti-societal movement, mostly women and low-ranking men struggling for equality. In the sixth century B.C., in a political move to gain support of the common people, the tyrant of Athens Peisistratus transformed the rural festivals into the Great or City Dionysia, which eventually became an international festival.

At these festivals, members of the Dionysiac cult performed, singing and dancing in a chorus to tell stories about Dionysus. Then on one occasion, the Dionysian priest Thespis stepped out of the chorus and began acting out a myth, speaking rather than singing, to become both the first playwright and actor of a Greek tragedy. It was from then on that Greek theater flourished and the festivals became venues for competitions, both of comic and tragic theatre.

The Romans adapted the celebration to their equivalent to Dionysus, Bacchus. Bacchanalia were feasts in honour of Bacchus and later Saturnalia Festivals were held in which slaves and their masters would exchange clothes in a day of drunken revelry. Saturnalia was later modified by the Roman Catholic Church, which was determined to limit such festivities to a period just prior to Ash Wednesday, the day marking Lent, a forty-day period of abstinence and personal sacrifice ending with Easter. The pre-Lent celebration evolved into a celebration of indulgences. In Italy it was called *carne vale* from Latin meaning *farewell to the flesh.*

In the 15th and 16th centuries in Portugal it came to be known as Entrudo, the introduction to Lent. Still a time for excess in feasting, drinking and entertainment, Entrudo was also marked by violence. It was this violent form of Carnival that arrived in Brazil in the 17th century. Intervention by the Church and the State resulted in dividing Carnival into two classes. Whites and middle-class Mulattos had their Ballroom Carnival, while Blacks and poor Mulattos had their Street Carnival. Then in the late 1800's there was a movement to change Entrudo to Carnival and bring everyone to the streets together (Source: http://www.ancientgr.com/archaeonia/arts/theatre/festival.htm).

"threshold" situations where regular conventions were broken and genuine dialogue became possible (Bakhtin, 1984:4). But most importantly for Bakhtin, it was a celebration of rebirth and transformation – an opportunity for renewal. Robert Stam elucidates in *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* (1992):

> In carnival, all that is marginalised and excluded – the mad, the scandalous, and the aleatory – takes over the centre in a liberating explosion of otherness. The principle of material body – hunger, thirst, defecation, copulation – becomes a positively corrosive force, and festive laughter enjoys a symbolic victory over death, over all that is held sacred, over all that oppresses and restricts (Stam, as quoted by Chance, 2008:1).

This statement draws attention to the positive, transformative and cathartic aspects of Bakhtin's conception of carnival, and introduces the body as an important element in the carnivalesque experience. During carnival, a specific carnivalesque time is connected with a specific carnivalesque body. Bakhtin makes use of the term 'grotesque' for any vision of the body that emphasises change in its nature through eating, evacuation, or sex; as opposed to the static ideal represented, in for example, classical Greek sculpture. He explains:

> The grotesque body is flesh as the site of becoming. As such, the key elements of the body are precisely those points at which it "out-grows its own self, transgresses its own limits … conceives a new, second body, the bowels and the phallus… Next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth through which enters the world to be swallowed up… All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is with them that the borders between one's own and other bodies and between the body and the world are breached (Bakhtin, as quoted by Clark and Holquist, 1984: 303).

For all its gross materiality, the grotesque body is therefore also figurative: standing on the "threshold of the grave and the crib," it serves as a sign of particular temporality of the moment when the old is making way for the new (Bakhtin, 1984:26). Here, we see Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque in terms of the profound and regenerative connection between life and death, capturing the hopefulness inherent in the human capacity for change.

In her essay, "Subverting the Norm: The Carnivalesque of David Cronenberg" (2008) Dorothy Chance quotes Robert Stam's account of Bakhtinian carnival as it relates to contemporary film. Cited in *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* (1992), Stam's interpretation proves useful in identifying a range of equivalent impulses in the visual arts. He breaks Bakhtin's conception down into thirteen filmic characteristics.[8] According to Stam, carnivalesque is socially disturbing, but not

[8] Robert Stam's list of Mikhail Bakhtin's characteristics of carnival:
1. Valorization of Eros and the life force, actualization of perennial nature myths

always positive. When carnivalesque works are positive they are considered an element of Menippean discourse. Chance refers here to Patrick Fuery's writings on Julia Kristeva. According to Kristeva "the Menippean experience is not cathartic; it is a festival of cruelty, but also a political act" (Fuery, as quoted by Chance, 2008:3). Summarised as a general inversion of social order, Fuery presents Kristeva's interpretation of Menippean discourse as a list of fourteen characteristics.[9] His list of the features of carnivalesque in film includes: representations of excess, dream-like qualities, themes of social disruption, dark comic humor, resistance to laws, figures of the grotesque, liminal spaces and distorted time periods (Chance, 2008:2). Similar, but with slight variations, Chance also cites Stam's lists of fourteen essential traits of the Menippean described by Bakhtin.[10] Reading through these lists

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2. Morbid version of 1. emphasising ritual sacrifice, concatenation of life and death, Eros and Thanatos, as crystallized by orgiastic sacrifice, a trope picked up by Bataille
3. Release from socially imposed sex roles
4. Celebration of grotesque bodies – struggle against puritanical views
5. Social overturning – world upside down
6. Hope in ongoing social and political change
7. Carnival as gay relativity – ambivalence and ambiguity
8. Feelings of union with community
9. Space of the sacred – mystical union with the cosmos
10. Language of the common people – obscene and nonsensical speech
11. Rejection of manners, etiquette
12. Non harmonious beauty – anticlassical aesthetics
13. Participatory spectacle – pageant without footlights – erases boundaries between spectator and performer. (Stam as quoted by Chance, 2008:21)

[9] Julia Kristeva's interpretation of Menippean discourse:
1. Both comic and tragic, serious and carnivalesque
2. Politically and socially disturbing
3. Highly inventive in philosophical and imaginative constructions
4. Freedom in use of film language, partly because it operates outside of the mainstream language structures
5. Elements of the fantastic, often combined with 'macabre naturalism'
6. Adventures unfolded in brothels, robbers dens, taverns, fairgrounds, and prisons, among erotic orgies and during sacred worship
7. Lack of distinction between virtues and vices
8. Use of madness, dreams, doppelgangers
9. Eccentricism in language
10. Strong use of contrasts, and sudden changes and transitions
11. A fascination with the double
12. An exteriorization of 'political and ideological conflicts of the moment'
13. It emphasizes the spectacle
14. It resists logical sequences and structures (Fuery, as quoted by Chance, 2008:21)

[10] Mikhail Bakhtin's essential traits of the Menippean:
1. Constant presence of a comic element – laughs at death and violence;
2. Extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention – lampooning institutions;
3. Emphasis on the adventures of an idea in its passage through the world;
4. Fusion of the fantastic, the symbolic, and slum naturalism;
5. Foregrounding of philosophical universalism and ultimate questions;
6. A three-planed structure involving heaven, earth, and hell;
7. A fondness for the experimental and the fantastic;
8. An emphasis on moral-psychological experimentation, split personality, insanity, and abnormal psychic states showing the 'unfinalizability of man' and his 'noncoincidence with himself';
9. Fondness for scandal and violations of decorum;
10. Love of sharp contrasts and oxymoronic combinations;
11. Elements of social utopia;
12. Wide use of inserted genres;
13. Polystylistic language and approach

one begins to get a keen sense of the performative nature of the carnivalesque, to understand the various ways that it may operate both within the creative process of making and the resultant artwork itself.

It is important here to summarise the carnivalesque as functioning on three levels. First there is the actual activity of participation, of partaking in a carnivalesque activity. This could include, for example, the act of attending an exhibition, or watching a performance or artist's film. Due to the simple reason that you have stopped working and taken the time to loose yourself in a creative moment where social restrictions, hierarchies and laws can be perceived as inverted, you are participating in a type of carnivalesque. Then there is the level at which carnival becomes the subject. It is at this level that the majority of the artworks examined throughout this research engage. The third, and perhaps more ambiguous, but no less remarkable, level functions invisibly within the creative work, as myth, where anything that communicates a message can be considered a myth (Chance, 2008:3).[11] In his essay, "Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture," (1987) Renate Lachmann clarifies the presence of myth in carnival. He proposes that in Bakhtinian carnival, myth is created through ambivalent humor, which denies death. By denying death, carnival inverts official institutions and creates a mythical place where people can exist in a more utopian or unofficial culture. Lachmann suggests this mythical time as a permanent alternative to official culture, but reiterates that ultimately, everything returns to its previous state (1987:41).

1.3 Selection and Scope

In my selection from a sizeable group of young and emerging artists working in comparably subversive ways I was guided by the desire to present works that reflected a unique and committed engagement to a professional art practice; and that are presented through a diverse range of media, to include photography, film and sculpture; and also, young artists that would benefit from not having previously been the subject of any sustained academic research.

By carnivalesque means of satire, grotesque realism and a particular focus on the mask as a means of social transgression, Michael MacGarry, for example, exposes the stereotypical Western representation of a starving and violent African identity by revealing its cause in the ongoing ramifications of imperialism and globalised trade.[12] He attacks both common and political personalities by creating false,

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14. Overt and hidden polemics with various philosophical, religious, and ideological schools and mockery of the 'masters of thought.' (Stam, as quoted by Chance, 2008:22)

[11] The dictionary defines myth as a story about superhuman beings of an earlier age, often used to explain how natural phenomena came into existence. These stories and traditions ultimately shape generational communication, dictating our values and reflecting our social attitudes and biases (Collins Paperback English Dictionary, 1987: 560).

[12] Michael MacGarry was born in Durban in 1978. On a full scholarship he graduated with a Masters in Fine Art (with distinction) from the University of Witwatersrand in 2004. Recipient of an Individual Artist Grant award by

but plausible fictional traits that graft contemporary social issues and political concepts onto their public identities. Becoming the different characters involved (researcher, witness, documenter and protagonist) MacGarry either photographs crafted scenes or creates objects or props from a series of unrealised films.[13] It is in this way that he manages to reconcile his overarching conceptual approach, articulated in the name of his avatar All.Theory.No.Practice, with the process of making more tangible artworks. It becomes clear in examining his works that they are intimately aligned with many of Mbembe's assertions on the postcolonial country. MacGarry's Africa is undoubtedly one "characterised by a distinctive style of improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion" (Mbembe, 2001:103).

Featured in *The New Spell* were four photographs namely, *Spiderman* (2003) (Figure 1); *La Tenda Rossa* (2004) (Figure 2) and two photographs from his *African Archetypes* series (2007): *The Classicist* (Figure 3) and *The Father (Reversal of Fortune)* (Figure 4); as well as a sculpture entitled *The Economy of Modernity* (2005) (Figure 5). Beyond this selection, my analysis includes the following works for discussion: *Tipp-Ex Politics* (2008) (Figure 6) a series of six wax sculptures that function as portraits of the five former, South African National Party State Presidents; *H.F. Verwoerd* and *Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki* from the *Champagne Socialists series* (2008) (Figures 7 & 8); a sculpture or prop from one of MacGarry's more ambitious 'films' *Scramble for Africa – The Sophistication of the Wise Primitive in a Giant Jungle* entitled, *Zhou Enlai and the Scramble for Africa* (2008) (Figure 9) articulating concerns with current and historical Chinese expansion on the African continent; and the sculpture *L'Étranger* (2008) (Figure 10) representative of recent U.S. President George W. Bush and his 'philanthropic' visit to Africa.

Like MacGarry, Themba Shibase sabotages history with contemporary anthropology, compelling new readings and meanings; and through a process of temporal conflation condenses the past and the present

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the National Arts Council of South Africa, in 2004, he was also shortlisted for the MTN New Contemporaries Award, curated by Melissa Mboweni, in 2008. In 2009 he was the recipient of the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for visual arts. His solo exhibitions include: *When enough people start saying the same thing*, 2008 at Art Extra, Johannesburg; *True/Story*, 2008 at KZNSA Gallery, Durban and *Or Until the World Improves*, 2004 at The Premises Gallery, Johannesburg. Selected group exhibitions include: *Life Less Ordinary: Performance and Display in South African Art*, 2009 at Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham; Self *not Self*, 2009 at Art Extra, Johannesburg; *Why Not?*, 2009 at Kuckei + Kuckei, Berlin; *Drawing Show*, 2008 at David Krut Projects, Johannesburg; *The New Spell*, 2008 at David Krut Projects, New York; *6x6*, 2008 at Rooke Gallery, Johannesburg; *The Trickster*, 2008 at Art Extra, Johannesburg; *Performing South Africa*, 2009 at Theater Hebbel Am Ufer, Berlin; *Impossible Monsters*, 2007 at Art Extra, Johannesburg; *Right Before Your Eyes*, 2007 at KZNSA Gallery, Durban; *Group Therapy*, 2005 at Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg; *.Dwg*, 2005 at Outlet Gallery, University of Tshwane; *Low Rider Show*, 2003 at Polvo Art Centre, Chicago; *x10*, 2001 at The Project, Dublin; *Outpost*, 2000 at KZNSA Gallery, Durban and *South African Contemporary Video Art*, 2000 at Camouflage Gallery, Belgium.

As an extension of his individual career as an artist, MacGarry forms one-third of the artist collaborative, Avant Car Guard together with Zander Blom and Jan-Henri Booyens. Functioning, for all intense and purposes as a single entity, Avant Car Guard creates work in a riotous critique on the South African art world. Their projects and resultant photographs, paintings and performances are documented on the website www.avantcarguard.com.

[13] These include: *La Tenda Rossa* (2004): HD video, approx. 25 min, colour, stereo sound; *LHR to JHB* (2002): Super 16mm to DV transfer, approx. 10 min, colour, stereo sound; *Scramble for Africa* (2007): HD video, approx. 10 min, colour, stereo sound; *Diaspora* (2008): HD video, approx. 5 min, colour, stereo sound.

onto a two-dimensional painted surface.[14] Shibase's focus lies on interrogating the notion of an "African Authentic Identity" by questioning instances of current autocratic leadership (Shibase, 2008). On exhibition were two paintings, *Wena Wendlovu (Big Al)* and *Wena Wendlovu (Taylor the Dictator and Thief)* (2008) (Figures 11 & 12) both depicting large handsome portraits of African struggle leaders rendered with eccentric distortion and grotesque spectacle. Both veteran-leaders are positioned between the fantastic and harshly realistic in a cynical and unflattering light where achieving any kind of accurate likeness of the leader in question seems less imperative than creating an image that calls the leader's moral and spiritual attitude directly into question. My analysis of Shibase's work extends to include two previous paintings from his *Wena Wendlovu* series (2007) (Figures 13 & 14) and the later work, *Economic Ascendance – A New Battle Ground* (2008) (Figure 15). While his *Wena Wendlovu* series is candid in its disapproval of subjects such as Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe – showing a sharp diffusion of hierarchy by locating the powerful African (male) identity within official or state culture where it is used for staging displays of magnificence, prodigality and absolute power – works such as *Economic Ascendance – A New Battle Ground* are more ambiguous and almost autobiographical in their exploration of an "authentic African identity".

Offering her interpretation of the explicitly female African identity, Nandipha Mntambo's works provoke a consciousness of the corporeal grotesque through her sculptures and photographs by combining human and animal imagery to form hybrid, feminine forms. [15] She has developed a

[14] Born in 1980 in Port Shepstone, in the lower south coast region of Kwazulu Natal, Themba Shibase is currently a Durban-based artist. He lectures in the Department of Fine Arts at Durban University of Technology where he is pursuing his Masters in Fine Art. Shibase was selected as one of four finalists to participate in the 2008 exhibition for MTN New Contemporaries. His solo exhibitions include: *Umhlaba Kabani / Whose Land?*, 2008 at Erdmann Contemporary, Cape Town and *D'Urban Critique*, 2005 at KZNSA Gallery, Durban. Selected group exhibitions include: *Hybrid Culture*, 2008 at Durban University of Technology, Durban; *The New Spell*, 2008 at David Krut Projects, New York; *Spier Contemporary 2007*, in Stellenbosch; *From Here to There*, 2006 at AVA Gallery, Cape Town; *Art Seasons: Cape Town*, 2007, Franschoek Valley, Paarl; *Form and Substance*, 2006 at Erdmann Contemporary, Cape Town; *New Painting*, 2006 at KZNSA Gallery, Durban, UNISA Gallery and Johannesburg Art Gallery; *Surface*, 2005 at Franchise Gallery, Johannesburg; *Being Here*, 2005 at KZNSA Gallery, Durban; *Red Eye*, 2005 at Durban Art Gallery; *Black*, 2004 at KZNSA Gallery, Durban; *The Legacy of Trevor Makhoba*, 2004 at BAT Centre, Durban and *Summer Show*, 2003 at BAT Centre, Durban.

[15] Born in Swaziland in 1982, Nandipha Mntambo graduated with a Masters in Fine Art (with distinction) from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, in June 2007. In 2005 she was the recipient of the Brett Kebble Art Awards Curatorial Fellowship, and in 2006 she was one of five young artists selected for the MTN New Contemporaries exhibition, curated by Khwezi Gule at Johannesburg Art Gallery. She is also the recipient of the latest Wits/BHP Billiton Fellowship, and will take up a residency at the Wits School of Arts, University of Witwatersrand, for three months early in 2010. Her solo exhibitions include: *Umphatsi Wemphi*, 2009 at Brodie/Stevenson, Johannesburg; *The Encounter*, 2009 at Michael Stevenson, Cape Town; *Ingabisa*, 2007 at Michael Stevenson, Cape Town; and *Locating me in order to see you*, 2007 (Master's exhibition) at Michaelis Gallery, Cape Town. Selected group exhibitions include *Life Less Ordinary: Performance and Display in South African Art*, 2009 at Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham; *Undercover: Performing and Transforming Black Female Identities*, 2009 at Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta; *Les Recontres de*, 2009 at Bamako Biennial of African Photography, Mali; *Self/Not-self*, 2009 at Brodie/Stevenson, Johannesburg; *Summer 2008/9 Projects*, 2009 at Michael Stevenson, Cape Town; *Performing South Africa*, 2009 at Theater Hebbel Am Ufer, Berlin; Disguise, 2008 at Michael Stevenson, Cape Town; *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*, 2008 at Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire; *Skin-to-skin: Challenging textile art*, 2008 at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg; *.za: giovane arte dal Sudafrica*, 2008 at Palazzo delle Papesse, Siena; *The Trickster*, 2008 at ArtExtra, Johannesburg; *Summer 2007/8*, 2008 at Michael Stevenson, Cape Town; *Apartheid: The South African Mirror*, 2007 at Centre de Cultura Contemporania de Barcelona; *Afterlife*, 2007 at Michael Stevenson, Cape Town; *Olvida quien soy - Erase me from who I am*, 2006 at Centro Atlantico de Arte

distinctive aesthetic through the use of cowhide as her preferred medium, which she tans and moulds onto casts of the female body – usually her own or her mother's. In the series *Silent Embrace* (2007) (Figures 16 and 17) and *Beginning of the Empire* (2007) (Figure 18), from which two digital works on paper are featured on the exhibition, Mntambo explores various aspects of control and feminine beauty by shaping and manipulating this cowhide into desired forms. The organic materials she uses such as hair and fat, together with the smells they exude, work simultaneously to attract and repel the viewer. Disrupting perceptions of bodily attraction and repulsion, it can be said that Mntambo challenges and subverts preconceptions regarding representation of the female body:

> People often comment on the fact that I have very little hair on my body and this is seen to be appealing or desirable; people also like the softness of woman's skin. I was trying to challenge this by creating ambivalent feminine forms that are both beautiful and hairy (Mntambo, 2007).

In this way, she exposes femininity and female sexuality as social constructs rather than as fundamental elements of an African identity. The grotesque, throughout Mntambo's making process and resultant iconography, is accordingly examined from a feminist context, in that female bodily functions are often 'abjected' by a patriarchal social order.[16] Although, it is from a discourse of feminism that Mntambo departs, the bodies she chooses to represent are not intended as victims, as damaged, abused or abject. Instead, her figures evoke a tangible presence of the corporeal with a sense of strength and empowerment. In her artist's statement, Mntambo posits that through making use of her own body, as well as that of her mother's, she is outwardly controlling how she is represented (Mntambo, 2007). When used and produced by the marginalised, the carnivalesque, with particular focus on the grotesque, has a distinct libratory tone and effect. Mntambo utilizes this emancipatory aspect of the grotesque inherent in its denial of hierarchy, without, however, idealising it. She seems well aware that her works, like carnivals, are ultimately sanctioned or authorized events. Other works to be considered include the cowhide sculpture *Indlovukati* (2007) (Figure 19) and the video and photographic series *Europa* (2008) (Figure 20).

Moderno, Las Palmas, Gran Canaria; *MTN New Contemporaries 2006*, 2006 at Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg; *Second to None*, 2006 at Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town and *In the Making: Materials and Process*, 2005 at Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town.

[16] The abject is a complex psychological, philosophical and linguistic concept developed by Julia Kristeva in her 1980 book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. She was partly influenced by the earlier ideas of the French writer, thinker and dissident Surrealist, Georges Bataille. It can be said very simply that the abject consists of those elements, particularly of the body, that transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety (1982). In the 1980s and 1990s many international artists became aware of the abject, and hence the grotesque, and began to reflect such sensibilities in their work. Louise Bourgeois, Paul McCarthy, Gilbert & George, Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Tim Noble and Sue Webster, Damien Herst and Mathew Barney can all be considered key contributors to the abject and grotesque in contemporary art. Correspondingly, embodied images of grotesque mutation and mutilation emerged in South African art through the work of artists such as Jane Alexander, Steven Cohen, Robert Hodgins, Norman Catherine and Leora Farber as a visual means through which a critique of uneven power relations became established.

Robyn Nesbitt and Nina Barnett are the artist collaborative behind the video installation *Warcry* (2007) (Figures 21 & 22) exhibited at *Spier Contemporary 2008*.[17] A re-filmed version of the same work is included in *The New Spell* with a view to exploring the sense of lingering imperialism present within our postcolonial identity. In this dual screen video installation, two schools perform their warcry at one another. Warcries have been used historically to fuel adrenalin and unite force and as a chant they express the energy and strength held in the organism of the school. For years this imperialist tradition has permeated the South African school system evoking, amongst other things, the exceptional qualities of group action. For the participating students these are moments of temporary liberation from the prevailing rules of decorum, hierarchical rank and privilege. The pulsing sound of hundreds of school children shouting in unison is an immersive and exhilarating experience that is at once threatening and rousing. As another ultimately sanctioned event, it is celebratory and grotesque in its carnival-like rebelliousness involving unity and laughter, but it is difficult not to recall an image here of the frightening and sinister grotesque. A group of adolescents in unadulterated fury raises certain questions around the early institutionalisation of violence as a result of uneven relations of power.

In summary, the scope of this paper will attempt to explore Mbembe's characterisation of contemporary African culture present in South African emerging art via Bakhtin's critical methodology of the carnivalesque. To reiterate, the works selected for discussion relate to greater bodies of work and thus provide me ample supportive material on which to draw. My research makes reference to other influential artists of this approach but will not offer a comprehensive historical background on the use of the carnivalesque throughout local or international art. I will only make brief reference to those influential South African artists who employ carnivalesque techniques in ways more oblique than central to their practices. Thus, my research does not profess to be an exhaustive body of historical

[17] Nina Barnett and Robyn Nesbitt have worked together on several collaborative projects, primarily using live performance and video installation. The artists received an award for the collaborative video *Warcry* (featured here) at *Spier Contemporary 2007.* Their work consistently activates the space between a pair of physical entities, using live performance and dual screen video installation to create various polarities and stimulate focused interaction.

Born in Johannesburg in 1983, Barnett currently lives in New York. She graduated with Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts (with distinction) from the University of Witwatersrand in 2006. In 2005 she was awarded the Martienssen Prize and in 2005, the Giovanna Milner Scholarship, both from the University of Witwatersrand. Two years later, in 2007, Barnett received the Gerard Sekoto award at the ABSA L'Atelier Awards. Nesbitt was born in 1984, in Johannesburg, and currently lives in Cape Town. She graduated with Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from the University of Witwatersrand in 2006 where she received the Anya Milner Scholarship in her final year. Nesbitt is currently pursuing her Masters in Fine Art at Michaelis, University of Cape Town. Collaborative group exhibitions in which she has participated include: *The New Spell*, 2008 at David Krut Projects, New York; *Spier Contemporary 2007*, Stellenbosch and Kazoo - *Play, Action, Intervention in Public and Private Space*, 2006 at the Premises Gallery, Johannesburg.

Robyn Nesbitt was born in 1984, in Johannesburg, and currently lives in Cape Town. She graduated with Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from the University of Witwatersrand in 2006 where she received the Anya Milner Scholarship in her final year. Nesbitt is currently pursuing her Masters in Fine Art at Michaelis, University of Cape Town. Recent group exhibitions include *The New Spell*, 2008 at David Krut Projects, New York; *Spier Contemporary 2007* in Stellenbosch; *Women: Photography and New Media, Imaging the self and body through portraiture*, 2006 at the Johannesburg Art Gallery; Kazoo - *Play, Action, Intervention in Public and Private Space*, 2006 at the Premises Gallery in Johannesburg; *Martienssen Prize Exhibition*, 2006 at the Gertrude Posel Gallery (WITS) in Johannesburg; *Semblat*, 2006 at the Alliance Francais in Johannesburg and *2004 – A4*, 2005 at the Coza Gallery in Johannesburg.

research on the various manifestations of the carnival impulse within the visual arts. Nor does it proclaim to prove its worth as a legitimate creative trend. My primary objective is to make an observation within the current tradition of socio-political South African art by contemplating the carnivalesque's remarkable suitability in demonstrating a certain critical tone toward the notion of an African cultural identity. My secondary objective is to cite some of the characteristics, socio-political functions and implications of employing such an approach. By critically considering this as one of the many enlivening tendencies within local production, *The New Spell* represented the work of five emerging artists to an American audience in the hope of increasing awareness of the continuing vitality of contemporary South African art.

2. CHAPTER TWO –

CARNIVALESQUE OVERTONES IN THE WORK OF MACGARRY, MNTAMBO, SHIBASE, BARNETT AND NESBITT

2.1 Positive Estrangement

In his book *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice, or Process?* Quayson rejects the idea of any defining "postcolonial moment" by proposing a critical practice that recognises the condition as not yet in existence. The task of the forward-looking critic or artist, he argues, is to in fact "postcolonialise", to align him or herself with an ongoing struggle against the aftereffects of colonialism (Quayson as quoted by Barnard, 2004:6). From the artist of any kind of socio-political leaning, this undoubtedly requires an urgent ethical response, mindful of Africa's difficult history of despair. However, this is not to say that his or her artwork should be limited to communicating merely another version of Africa's dark realism.

On the contrary: Themba Shibase's large-scale series of paintings (oil and acrylic on canvas) entitled, *Wena Wendlovu (His Excellency)* (2007 – 2009) (Figures 11- 14), for instance, show African "struggle veteran-leaders" painted in a guttural, expressionist manner that induce amusement simply by their nerve in so frankly communicating largely unspoken discontent. Reminiscent of royal Renaissance portraits, these handsome works comfortably introduce the viewer into the frame through their sheer physical scale, the direct frontality of their subjects, and the visceral intensity with which they are painted. However, the uses of incongruous colours to render the faces of, for example, Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe, translate into a macabre naturalism functioning to subvert any implicit historical readings of the painting's subject. Although this naturalism is at times less challenged in the portrayal of, say, the late Zairian President, Mobuto Sésé Seko, the viewer is nonetheless confronted with an underlying sense of malevolence. Looking at this uncanny portrait it is almost possible to evince an affinity for the paintings of Francis Bacon. As "studies of socially produced deformations of the individual" *Study after Velásquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953) and *Figure with Meat* (1954), summon the subject's emotions into the presence of the viewer making their moral and spiritual grotesqueness easier to perceive (Prestel Dictionary of Art and Artists in the 20th Century, 2000:33). It seems as if the boundaries that separate viewer from the subject have been erased in a sort of participatory or carnivalesque spectacle.

The sizeable scale of Shibase's works and their composition of the subject in foreground, devoid of any contextualising backdrop, allude to the Old Master royal or state portrait often created merely as flagrant displays of their subject's own magnificence and prodigality. The satirical insinuation to this inherited objective is reaffirmed in the title of the series, *Wena Wendlovu* – a Zulu phrase for royalty and can be literally translated as 'great elephant'. Its use generally has two connotations. The first is that the elephant is regarded as a majestic creature, symbolising grand elegance and power. The second is that the leader who is greeted with praise is awarded a likeness to this majestic animal. For Shibase, this comparison raises many contradictions with the image of the modern African ruler. Employing a

carnivalesque diffusion of hierarchy to expose what he sees as the limits and copious frivolities within our newly democratic society, he attempts to expose these contradictions within instances of modern autocratic leadership. As the recurrent brunt of Shibase's joke, the phenomenon of absolute power within paintings such as *Wena Wendlovu (Big Al)* (2008) (Figure 11) and *Wena Wendlovu (Taylor the Dictator and Chief)* (Figure 12) of the same year (and included in *The New Spell*), pointedly identify those who possess it – or are possessed by it – and raise questions around the many ways it destroys or corrupts. The former points unswervingly to Libya's Colonel Al Gaddafi, whilst the latter to Sierra Leone dictator, Charles Taylor. With vacant gazes and relaxed body language, the arrogance of each subject reflects indirectly upon an overwhelming sense of public complacency. Laying blameworthiness both within the "commandment" and the "powerless", these paintings expose those who, through their own apathy or incapacity, have encouraged the prolonged evasion of certain postcolonial leaders from any solid form of criticism for their many acts of brutal and autocratic leadership (Mbembe as quoted in Emerson and Morson, 1990:435). Instead, such leaders are held in almost infallible heroic positions, as a result of their preliminary roles in the people's emancipation (Shibase, 2007:186).

The parody inherent in these portraits functions to emphasise an essential methodological point, that this kind of defamiliarisation of subject plays a central part of any kind of progressive critique.[18] Works such as these makes us aware of the potential for productive estrangement resulting from a carnivalesque and satirical inversion of ideas. As a combination of parody and litigious candour, this line of attack has enjoyed a relatively brief and recent history in South Africa. Prior to the work of artists such as Johannes Phokela, Nicholas Hlobo, Brett Murray and Bitterkomix (Conrad Botes and Anton Kannemeyer), the subversive message was often couched in metaphor, veiled or multifaceted. Oppositional parody has, for a number of years, been employed by artists such as: William Kentridge, Tommy Motswai, Samson Mudzunga, Norman Catherine, Robert Hodgins and David Brown, but in ways more oblique than central to their practices. In the last ten years, a certain shift in tone has occurred to include a growing number of artists who have integrated satire and positive estrangement into their work. Other than Michael MacGarry and Themba Shibase, this can be motivated in varying degrees within the work of Husain and Hasan Essop, Avant Car Guard (Michael MacGarry, Jan-Henri Booyens and Zander Blom), Ruth Levin, Anthea Moys, Robyn Nesbitt, Nina Barnett, Nandipha Mntambo, Lawrence Lemoana - and as previously mentioned, Brett Murray, Bitterkomix (Conrad Botes and Anton Kannemeyer), Nicholas Hlobo and Johannes Phokela.

Although this tongue in cheek approach has been honed and analysed for many years within the South African political cartoon tradition, and a number of scholars have incorporated Bakhtinian theory into

[18] Parody can be defined here as imitation with a critical difference and not always at the expense of the parodied. Comparatively, in satire, individual vices or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, and irony, ideally with the intent to bring about some sort of improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be funny, the purpose of satire is not primarily humor in itself so much as an attack on something of which the artist strongly disapproves. A defining feature of satire is its strong vein of irony or sarcasm, but parody, burlesque, exaggeration, juxtaposition, comparison, analogy, and double entendre are all frequently used in satirical art. The essential point is that in satire, irony is militant, while parody is less ironic in nature (Paton and Powell: 1988:23).

their analyses of visual art, there exists no locally specific academic research, measured against a barometer of local contemporary culture, on the specific development of parody, satire and the carnival impulse within South African visual art. Most references to the use of both parody and satire in art are made parenthetically in feature and review articles on particular artists published in magazines and journals such as Art South Africa, De Arte and the online equivalent, Artthrob. I have, to date, not been able to locate any published survey articles or exhibition catalogues on South African artistic practice in relation to carnivalesque satire. Although, not strictly related to satire, *Punch-Line: Humour and Hurt in Contemporary African Art*, is an exhibition proposal written by Prof. Colin Richards, published in Art South Africa, which proves an unusual exception. In this proposal for the 2007 Venice Biennale, Richards explores the surprising relationship between humour and hurt (2007:13). Whereas, internationally, there have been few exhibitions (and resultant catalogues) that have explored the relationship between satire and the visual arts directly, perhaps the closest being *Breaking Step / U Raskoraku*: *displacement, compassion and humour in recent art from Britain* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, 2007) and *When Humour Becomes Painful* (Migros Museum fur Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, 2005). The lack of locally specific research points to the need for an exploration into the different manifestations of satire in South African art and its power to achieve necessary positive estrangement.

In other works such as *Economic Ascendance – A New Battle Ground* (2008) (Figure 15), Shibase approaches this attempt at genuine dialogue from an alternative perspective. In a style that can be described as more loose and gestural, but perhaps less formally resolved than his *Wena Wendlovu* series, these works explore the role of the urban African male, underpinned by carnivalesque rituals and secrets. They give the impression of wistful diary sketches – autobiographical in their representation of a young black man and his passage through the urban African landscape. With a view to subverting beliefs around the homogenising notion of an 'African Authentic Identity' informed by 'colonial gaze' perspectives, they explore the notion of identity through Shibase's own role as an educated, urban black male, whilst keeping in mind his ancestral heritage. As a result, this series can be said to articulate Mbembe's concerns for recognising the unlikeliness of a coherent postcolonial identity in Africa, where a person may, at different moments, have to rely on affiliations of kinship, ethnicity, religion, custom, political party, or professional grouping, and where making the wrong choice among all these connections can have fatal consequences. "Becoming a subject" in such circumstances, or so Mbembe argues, requires the mobilisation of not one single "identity", but of several fluid "mitotic" identities, which "by their very nature, must be constantly 'revised' in order to achieve maximum instrumentality and efficacy as and when required. It is for this reason that a certain degree of deviousness, or theatricality, or simply 'a willingness to do the extraordinary' becomes an essential survival skill" where identities seem to be forged on the thresholds and at the boundaries of tradition, ethnicity, culture and race (2001:104).

Selected for *The New Spell*, two of MacGarry's photographs from his *African Archetypes* series (2007), *The Classicist* and *The Father (Reversal of Fortune)* function in an equally astute way. *The Classicist* (Figure 3) shows a black, buxom woman standing naked with her back towards the camera against a white wall. She stands contrapposto, with her hand resting gently on what simply reads as a large pile of white foam. This object, functioning here as a prop within the frame, is in fact recognisable as one of the artist's sculptures titled *The Economy of Modernity* (2005) to be discussed shortly in further detail. To the right of the model and at the bottom of the white wall one spots an arbitrary plug socket; and to the right of that leans a giant ruler. These purposefully placed objects, coupled with the artificial light source filtering in from the right, and a thin bar of flat colour – two shades of grey on the right of the photograph, clearly inserted digitally by the artist after the photograph was taken – work together to key the viewer into the deliberately staged and mediated quality of this work.

The accompanying label placed beside the work on exhibition was written by the artist, and read as follows:

> This work features a prostitute I paid R300.00 for a 40-minute photo shoot at my apartment. I found her in a local newspaper under the 'Adult Entertainment' listing and called her the same afternoon to book her. Her name is Gisele, she is 26 years old and is from Nigeria. The large wooden ruler to Gisele's right is from a work I started several months ago, and to the left is a sculpture made of foam titled *The Economy of Modernity* (MacGarry, 2008).

The same frank and explanatory approach appeared on the label alongside *The Father (Reversal of Fortune)*:

> This work features a mask I made of Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the People's Republic of China, from a Punu mask originally from Ghana I bought for R 450.00. The person wearing the mask is myself, and the photograph was taken with one set of pro-lights and a camera on self-timer. The suit, collared shirt and red neck tie I bought the same day this photograph was taken at a Woolworths store, with all three items coming to R 1150.00. I have subsequently worn the same outfit to a wedding. Minus the mask (MacGarry, 2008).

The Father (Reversal of Fortune) (Figure 4) shows a masked figure dressed in a white collared shirt, black dinner jacket and red necktie. MacGarry's use of the mask, representative here of Zhou Enlai, is particularly carnivalesque in that it is both ritualistic and grotesque and creates a wonderful tension between alter ego and a communal melodrama. Raising concerns around the epic phenomenon of Chinese expansion across the African continent in search of oil, industry and opportunities for globalised trade, this work also tackles broader issues around representation, identity and difference. MacGarry's use of the carnivalesque mask also relates to Guy Debord's theory of spectacle (1967). Debord's work (to be discussed later in more detail) is based on the often violent and oppressive social

control that masquerades as a celebration of betterment and progressive evolution on the pretext of mutual business (Boje, 2001).[19]

Both of the above photographs function in sardonic commentary on what MacGarry considers to be a current wave of contrived South African art thrust on the viewer under the guise of "documentary photography". He disapprovingly cites contemporary photographers such as Mikhail Subotsky and Pieter Hugo as guilty of dramatising their photographs to the extent of entirely exoticising their African subjects. In an effort to defeat this approach, MacGarry offers his viewers a full account of the creative process involved in making each work, in place of any explanation of glorified intention. Reading whom the prostitute is in the photograph, how much he paid her to travel to his apartment, or the cost of silicon foam to cover a wooden frame is at first slightly unfulfilling, but then amusing in its guilelessness. The relationship he sets up between these photographs, their titles and this descriptive text works to strip away the mysticism from the, all too often hyped, art-making process. It is in this way that he exposes the usual rhetoric and pattern of interpretation by robbing his subjects of any kind of implied narrative. In a carnivalesque exposé of the so called "art farce", generalising them as examples of "African Archetypes", as their titles suggest, seems a ludicrous endeavour. Beyond these particular examples, MacGarry also unpacks the dominant stereotyped representations of Africa as an idea or myth rather than a tangible reality.

2.2 Excess in Africa

Reading his account of the vulgarity of power in the postcolony, a slight mystification arises as to whether or not Mbembe finds something "specifically African" about the "defecation, copulation, pomp, and sumptuousness" he uses to so vehemently describe postcolonial power relations (2001:108). Although he denies such a claim, the grotesque imagery he employs can in many cases be identified as characteristically "African".[20] Surrounded by neediness and poverty, food and therefore greed become

[19] It is interesting to note here that MacGarry's unfavorable view toward the Chinese influence across Africa has shifted somewhat since his recent visit to Angola. There, he experienced and documented the overwhelming extent of the Chinese role played in (re)building the country's infrastructure after years of cold war. Over 100 000 Chinese workers have spread out across Angola, laying railroad tracks, paving new highways and building hotels and homes. As a result, MacGarry currently acknowledges a stance slightly more sympathetic to the one he adopts in *The Father (Reversal of Fortune)* of an increasingly powerful, resource-hungry nation veiled behind a mask of scope for potential business.

[20] The 'grotesque' is not usually difficult to identify in a work of art, but as a term it can be somewhat challenging to define. In conversation, grotesque commonly means strange, fantastic, ugly or bizarre, and thus is often used to describe peculiar shapes and distorted forms. In fiction, characters are usually considered grotesque if they induce both empathy and disgust, where the reader becomes piqued by the grotesque's attractive side, and wonders whether the character can conquer their darker side. What the majority of definitions share is a sense of ambiguity and paradox. Harpham describes grotesque designs in a state of constant re-positioning, eluding any kind of classification:

> …grotesques have no consistent properties other than their own grotesqueness…they do not manifest predictable behaviour …the word designates a condition of being just outside of focus, just beyond the reach of language. It accommodates the things left over when the categories of language are exhausted… (Harpham, 1982:3)

of great consequence to both the deprived and the gluttonous affluent. In her scrutiny of his text, Barnard also points to:

> …Mbembe's extravagant description of the postcolonial power relations as a case of theophagy, where the masses consume the autocrat who proclaims himself as a god, gives further credence to this reading. While the intention is to express the way in which the discourse surrounding the postcolonial autocrat seems to be focused, fetishistically, on the body (as though Mbembe seizes the image of the devoured god from Jan Kott and George Bataille), the figure is nevertheless uncomfortably evocative of the stereotypical cannibal banquet (2004:16).

Can we, as South African citizens, be described as equally trapped in passive laughter? In spite of our relatively transparent and flexible democratic leadership, a rising sense of the arbitrariness and crudeness of power in South Africa can no longer be ignored. For the last fifteen years, an element of tasteless display on the part of the new ANC (African National Congress) leadership has revealed itself, with leaders spending government funds on unnecessary luxury vehicles, chartering private airplanes to resort and shopping locations. Profligate spending and grotesque salaries are rife among public servants, with over sixty-four ministers and deputy ministers recently receiving cars, bodyguards, and drivers. More foreboding than such indulgences is the manner in which these flashy life-styles are often defended. Bobby Godsell, who replaced Mohammed Valli Moosa as Eskom (South Africa's Electricity Supply Commission) chairman last year, was brought in to explain why chief executive Jacob Maroga

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In Bakhtin's, *Rabelais and His World*, he sums up the nature of the grotesque body by pointing out its emphasis on orifices and protuberances; in essence exposing all those parts and processes that are suppressed by our social codes of behaviour. The grotesque body in no way abstracts into forms or figures, but remains resolutely a body of flesh and blood (Russo, 1995:12).

Although expressed and conceived in significantly different ways from the Enlightenment onward, three major strands of grotesque discourse seem to have persisted. Connelly describes these as the classical, ornamental, emblematic and carnivalesque. The ornamental grotesque can be described as challenging the boundaries of Renaissance style and prompting aesthetic debates around the balance of power between artistic license and rules of design. The emblematic, on the other hand, interpreted the grotesque as a kind of hidden, imaginative and universal language or primitive expression. This emblematic grotesque as non-linear, pictured language was advanced by John Ruskin, in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853).

The populist, canivalesque tradition is overtly transgressive in realms beyond aesthetic. Bakhtin's grotesque bodies shift into the carnivalesque category by performing a course and comic burlesque, exposing all those parts (orifices and protuberances) normally suppressed by social codes of behaviour. It is this type that is arguably of the most relevance to the grotesque as it appears in selected works by MacGarry and Mntambo, in that it offers a tentative framework for understanding its potential subversive agency within South African art practice by either attempting to promote social change, or as a simple means of bearing critical witness to our many distorted relations of power. Their works reveal the oppositional spirit of the medieval carnival by employing a grotesque aesthetic as an alternative brand of satire or mimicry that has moved beyond simple negation by introducing an element of reviving and renewing (Connelly, 2003:7).

Another populist tradition that intersects with the carnivalesque, and should be mentioned, known as Traumwerk was inhabited by more fearful grotesques, whose bodies are monstrous, tormented, or decomposing. Here one finds frequent representations of the dance of death and the last judgment. These do not seem to play on the body's appetites, but rather on its inevitable failure and death. They exude their own kind of dark humour, but it is a humour absurd enough to make the horrible bearable and to soften our responses of fear and disgust (Connelly, 2003:8).

received an obscene salary package at the very time when the utility was at its lowest ebb. ANC MP Gerhard Koornhof noted that the increase from R3.9 million to R4.9 million was indeed 27 percent and was "simple arithmetic". Godsell blamed the media for getting it wrong, but admitted that perhaps the financial statements – in the Eskom annual report – may have been misleading. More recently, DA MP David Maynier, who has been exposing arms industry deals, has exposed another round of salary bravado. Armscor (Armaments Corporation of South Africa) chief executive Sipho Thomo received a nearly 90 percent pay increase in 2008. His salary rose 19 percent to R1.45million, and his benefits rose 1200 percent from R108 624 to R1.4 million (Pressly, 2009:1).

It is within such an atmosphere of overindulgence that certain artists have begun to diagnose the vulgarity of power in the postcolony. MacGarry's *Tipp-Ex Politics* series (2008) (Figure 6) is perhaps the clearest exemplar of this excessive sensibility. This series of works records such vulgarity of power by representing the agents of such excess in terms of the same crude physicality that characterises the corpulent strongmen of Mbembe's postcolony. Exploring this pessimistic conception of postcolonial power, *Tipp-Ex Politics* comprises six wax sculptures that function as uncanny portraits of the five former, South African National Party State Presidents: D.H. Malan (1948 – 1954); J.G. Strydom (1954 – 1958); H.F. Verwoerd (1958 – 1966); B.J. Vorster (1966 – 1978); P.W. Botha (1978 – 1984) and F.W. de Klerk (1985 – 1994). These apartheid-leader caricatures are rendered phallic in form with a degree of abstract mutilation that again violates any sense of physical likeness or integrity. Evoking themes of power, stupidity and excess, these formless aberrations dripping in a fleshy, white, semen-like wax seem to confuse orifices with wounds, leading the viewer beyond the body's limited space and into its depths.

MacGarry's humour, in this instance, has a critical edge. The excremental joking is a way of implicating these subjects in an atmosphere of both filth and contamination, and of uneasy and desperate hilarity. In form and character, they seem more to be defined by what they lack: fixity, stability and order and may be better understood as 'trans', as modalities; better described for what they do, rather than what they are. The title of the series, *Tipp-Ex Politics* (Tipp-Ex being a South African-branded product used to 'white-out' errors written in ink) reaffirms this in its reference to the selective, flexible and ideological operations attendant on the construction of official historical memory and archiving, as well as the mechanics of national memorialising and monumentalising so prevalent in a post-apartheid South Africa (MacGarry, 2008). The bust-like quality of each sculpture is perhaps another allusion to those white leaders who build shrines to celebrate their power and language, and the government officials who build their own private palaces, radio and TV stations, and airports in ridiculous exorbitance.

It is in this respect (of the artworks described as modalities) that this series also resonates with Bakhtin's lesser-known writings on aesthetics in which he offered a series of insightful queries with which to interpret visual works of art. Refuting formalist Kantian aesthetics and the expressivist theories of German Neo-Kantians such as Theodore Lipps, he steered clear of systematic and exclusively

theoretical thought by treating the aesthetic as a sphere in which the cognitive-theoretical and ethical-practical spheres may be brought together. Whereas most aesthetic theories are concerned with the category of beauty; some giving priority to the aesthetic object or work of art, and others to the perceiving subject, the viewer who looks and experiences, Bakhtin focused on the creative process itself, on the activity of the artist or author who creates; with concepts such as answerability and dialogue, outsideness and unfinalisability as central to his thesis (Haynes, 1995:212).

> Aesthetic activity does not create a reality that is wholly new. Unlike cognition and performed action, which create nature and social humanity, art celebrates, adorns and recollects… It enriches and completes them, and above all else it creates the concrete intuitive unity of these two worlds. It places man in nature… it humanizes nature and naturalizes man. (Bakhtin, 1984:317).[21]

Cast in bronze, *H.F. Verwoerd* (Figure 7) from the *Tipp-Ex Politics* series, is intended to be displayed next to the similarly oversized male phallus, *Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki* from *Champagne Socialists* series (2008) (Figure 8). Though the latter is left in its in initial industrial foam and black wax state, the intended proximity of the two works evokes the feeling that MacGarry neither wishes to redeem nor vilify specific past or present events but rather to alter them for review through a series of fictional narratives and temporal comparisons.[22] Whilst satirically, *Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki* functions in a similar way to *H.F. Verwoerd*, it does so with a cynical orientation directed more pointedly towards South Africa's impotent or futile current state of political affairs and potentially dangerous affinity for immoderation. The promiscuous vulgarity and physical grossness that in Mbembe's account presents such a threat to liberty and justice, finds itself once again on the cards here, amidst an era of liberation and democracy. The title of the series, *Champagne Socialists* appropriately alludes to a band of inefficient, hard-drinking socialites with their "charter" making unfeasible promises of houses, cars and jobs to an underprivileged public.

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[21] This statement draws attention to Bakhtin's focus on the unique human being, located spatially and temporally; and thus having a particular human relationship to all other persons, objects, and events in the world. As humans, according to Bakhtin, we engage in aesthetic activities in order to express and shape perception and experience. He proposed carnival as the perfect example of such an experience.

[22] In citing this use of temporal compression and the fictional narrative, it is necessary to identify that in both series, *Tipp-Ex Politics* and *Champagne Socialists*, carnivalesque 'threshold' and or 'boundary' situations materialise to express a particular dialogic and polyphonic awareness. Developed in Bakhtin's *The Dialogical Imagination* (1970), polyphonic dialogue refers to the fact that every utterance is by nature dialogic because it requires a speaker and a listener/responder, as opposed to monologic dialogue that can easily become empty and lifeless. At the most fundamental level, MacGarry engages in an internal dialogue with the physical world that informs his sculpture and photography. He also engages in a dialogue with the past, especially with South Africa's many resistance artists who dealt with apartheid's ills, as well as with the present through the work of his more established contemporaries, such as Kendell Geers and Guy Tillim. Dialogues with his chosen subjects are also clearly imperative. Bakhtin maintains that this range of dialogue illustrates the self as never autonomous, but always existing in a nexus of formative relationships. To be truly dialogic and polyphonic, dialogue must take place through paradoxes, differing points of view, and unique consciousnesses. MacGarry's works also draw attention to their own construction and exhibit a carnivalesque (and postmodern) narrative drive in the way they reinterpret and challenge engendered explanations of contemporary events and culture. They do so in such a way that they expose fusions of high and low art and show certain skepticism towards the meta-narrative.

MacGarry then extends the sense of irrepressible greed and excess explored in *Tipp-Ex Politics* and *Champagne Socialists* to articulate concerns with both historical and current foreign expansion on the African continent. *Zhou Enlai and the Scramble for Africa* (2008) (Figure 9) is a sculpture or prop from one of his more ambitious proposed films entitled, *Scramble for Africa – The Sophistication of the Wise Primitive in a Giant Jungle*. Comprising a life-size mannequin, smothered in wax and black spray-paint, and wearing only a pair of blue slacks cut off at the knee, a parachute harness, an AK-47 rifle and yellow ivory-eyed, wooden mask, a figure stands below a deflated orange and white parachute suspended from above. This figure is intended to represent the ex-Premier of the People's Republic of China, Zhou Enlai, and alludes once again to China's booming commerce with Africa. No longer a progressive ally to any African country locked in a liberation struggle, China now follows a strict policy of noninterference to protect its supply of natural resources. Building oil refineries and pipelines with unsavory regimes like Sudan, China's mounting involvement with Africa remains disguised and unregulated.

Similarly observing superficial political alliances in the service of self-seeking enrichment, *L'Étranger* (2008) (Figure 10) represents recent U.S. President George W. Bush and comments sardonically on his past 'philanthropic' visit to Africa. One year after the announcement that the United States government was going to accelerate the militarisation of Africa, President George Bush visited African countries, Benin, Ghana, Liberia, Rwanda and Tanzania in an effort to promote the neo-conservative agenda of the present US administration while promoting the conservative ideas of abstinence as the basis of the fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Campbell, 2007:2). *L'Étranger* is made from a mannequin covered in a muddy mixture of black, yellow and green industrial foam and enamel paint. Its head comprises a finely sculpted, white North African mask that MacGarry has once again found and altered. For feet, the figure sports a pair of almost inappropriate black leather shoes that in fact previously belonged to the artist himself. The accompanying text (published in MacGarry's exhibition catalogue for *When enough people start saying the same thing*, 2008) is rather amusingly, borrowed from the Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie song *We are the World* as a contemptuous comment on America's generally audacious and paternalistic worldview:

USA for Africa - We Are The World

There comes a time when we heed a certain call (Lionel Ritchie)
When the world must come together as one (Lionel Ritchie & Stevie Wonder)
There are people dying (Stevie Wonder)
Oh, and it's time to lend a hand to life (Paul Simon)
The greatest gift of all (Paul Simon/Kenny Rogers)

We can't go on pretending day by day (Kenny Rogers)
That someone, somehow will soon make a change (James Ingram)
We're all a part of God's great big family (Tina Turner)
And the truth (Billy Joel)
You know love is all we need (Tina Turner/Billy Joel)

(CHORUS)
We are the world, we are the children
We are the ones who make a brighter day so let's start giving (Michael Jackson)
There's a choice we're making we're saving our own lives (Diana Ross)
It's true we'll make a better day just you and me (Michael Jackson/Diana Ross)

Well, send'em you your heart so they know that someone cares (Dionne Warwick)
And their lives will be stronger and free (Dionne Warwick/Willie Nelson)
As God has shown us by turning stone to bread (Willie Nelson)
And so we all must lend a helping hand (Al Jurreau)

We are the world, we are the children (Bruce Springsteen)
We are the ones who make a brighter day so let's start giving (Kenny Logins)
There's a choice we're making we're saving our own lives (Steve Perry)
It's true we'll make a better day just you and me (Daryl Hall)

When you're down and out there seems no hope at all (Michael Jackson)
But if you just believe there's no way we can fall (Huey Lewis)
Well, well, well, let's realize that a change can only come (Cyndi Lauper)
When we (Kim Carnes)
stand together as one (Kim Carnes/Cyndi Lauper/Huey Lewis)

(REPEAT CHORUS AND FADE)

© Michael Jackson & Lionel Ritchie 1985 (MacGarry, 2008:5)

The spectacle quality of this work is perhaps just as palpable as the carnivalesque. Here, North America plays superpower and manufactures public entertainment to put the spotlight on its positive acts of global corporate power. The sculpture, together with Jackson's and Ritchie's lyrics, celebrates the "benevolence" and progress of US power with affirming theatrics. Endemic to modern corporate power, Debord describes the spectacle as a theatric performance that legitimates, rationalises, and camouflages violent production and consumption. He contends the theatrical event is often used to spin a good story in the face of bad news, amounting to total manipulation of the meaning-making process to serve the production and perpetuation of power:

> In all its specific forms, as information or in the propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life (Debord, 1967:6).

2.3 Mbembe's Vulgate

Mbembe brings the term "vulgate" into play to describe his disdain for so the called carnival practices ordinary people perform in the name of cultural resistance. He asserts that the excess, vulgarity, and obscenity of carnival used to parody the privileged, according to Bakhtin's conception, ought to be identified within the ruling classes too. The relationship between what he calls the commandment and the cibles (targets) may not always be irreducibly opposed, but can be revealed as far more complicated and intricate:

> It is only through a shift in perspective that we can understand that the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can best be characterised as convivial, a relationship fraught by the fact of the *commandment* and its "subjects" having to share the same living space (Mbembe, 2001:104).

Thus, Mbembe seems to agree with Bakhtin's location of the obscene and grotesque within non-official cultures such as carnival where 'ordinary people' employ these examples of vulgarity to parody official culture either as a means of resistance to the dominant culture or as a refuge from it. However, he also insists on the use of the grotesque and obscene within official or state culture where through administrative and bureaucratic practices a non-negotiable master code or *commandment* is created to maintain the fiction of a society devoid of any kind of conflict. Barnard describes this relationship of "conviviality" as one of mutual seduction between the rulers and the ruled, where:

> … the official world appropriates popular vulgarity and, in so doing, ensures its hold on the people, while the people borrow their forms of expression and "ideological repertoires" from officialdom. The leaders put on extravagant displays of their own glory, while the poor, in their desire for splendor, "clothe themselves in the flashy rags of power" and thus ratify and recycle rather than criticize the epistemology of the commandment. It is in this intimate symbolic entanglement – where the distinction between the "beautiful people" and the "ragged souls" is erased – that Mbembe sees the source and perpetuation of powerlessness and tyranny in the postcolony (Mbembe as quoted by Barnard, 2004:9).

Warcry (2007) (Figures 21 & 22) by the artist collaborative Robyn Nesbitt and Nina Barnett is perhaps the clearest exemplar of this conviviality that I am trying to describe. Produced for *Spier Contemporary 2007* and included in *The New Spell* this award-winning work comprises a dual-projection video and sound installation, in which two schools perform their warcry at one another.[23] The performance

[23] *Spier Contemporary* is a biennial exhibition of contemporary South African art and an accompanying series of awards. The first exhibition was launched on the Spier Estate in the Western Cape on 12 December 2007 and ran there till 15 February 2008. It subsequently traveled to the Johannesburg Art Gallery. During this extended period of time it was seen by over 25 000 people and received extensive critical acclaim. It is widely accepted that *Spier*

involved at least three hundred girl learners from Parktown School for Girls in Johannesburg versus the same number from Parktown Boys. Bellowing their school war cry "Akulama bani" all at once, the projection shows the boy learners lined up outside on their school's sports ground, while the girls were filmed crammed into their school hall.

Photographic documentation of both events show a mass of learners facing a single line of older pupils – the boys in their red and black school uniforms with their arms adjoined, the girls unattached, fists raised in their blue and black attire. Looking toward the camera, the viewer is presented in both cases with the faces of hundreds of multi-racial students facing a single line of students orientated away from the viewer and toward the crowd. In both instances the camera is positioned just high enough to capture as many of the students as possible without loosing the possibility for the viewer to engage in the participatory sensation to feel that he or she is actually there amongst the throbbing crowds.[24]

In *The New Spell* each school was projected onto opposite and facing walls. Even from a distance, one could hear the overwhelming, but familiar sound of the chanting students. For many South African viewers this sound is associated with a certain nostalgia for being part of a school warcry. Moving into the space between each projection, the viewer became immersed in the reverberating sounds but then focused their attention toward the walls on either side of them. The polarities of each of the high-school groups becoming clear through their gender, uniform colour and performance style. Whilst the boys perform in a fierce, combative manner, the girls are more playful but at the same time surprisingly intense in their expressions.[25]

As a publicly sanctioned tradition, the warcry is decidedly carnivalesque in nature. For the participating students it provides a modern-day "threshold" moment of temporary liberation from the prevailing rules of decorum, hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. The warcry thus appears celebratory in its carnival-like rebelliousness involving the students in unity and laughter, but the unexpected combination of a group of adolescents in unadulterated fury raises certain questions. In contemplating this peculiar imperialist tradition that continues to permeate the South African school system, one is also struck by the apparent institutionalisation of violence that occurs at a young age. No longer represented as individuals, the students are amassed into one identity – an identity fused with the national destiny of postcolonial Africa. One wonders whether this identity, as Mbembe suggests, has in fact appropriated

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Contemporary has contributed positively to the South African visual arts industry benefiting artists, curators and writers. (Source: http://africacentre.net/)

[24] For the Johannesburg leg of *Spier Contemporary 2007* Barnett and Nesbitt arranged a live performance of *Warcry*. They hauled in busloads of Parktown Boys' and Parktown Girls' learners in uniform, lined up the stomping adolescents in two regiments, on either side of the Johannesburg Art Gallery's outdoor central courtyard, and instructed them to scream. In speaking to the few viewers that attended (mostly friends of the artists and school moms) it seems that the majority found the performance especially rousing.

[25] To view *Warcry* (2007) live visit the following link on Nina Barnett's website: http://www.ninabarnett.org/content/warcry

the popular vulgarity from officialdom maintaining the historically entrenched uneven and convivial relationship between postcolonial South Africa and Western imperialism?

Included in *The New Spell*, MacGarry's *The Economy of Modernity* (2006) (Figure 5) addresses Mbembe's "vulgate" from another perspective by exposing this convivial relationship in contemporary Africa where colonialisation has made way for economic imperialism – "the same monster with a different face" (MacGarry, 2008). MacGarry's installation comprises a wooden frame covered in industrial foam, white paint, two speakers, a table, a reading lamp and an iPod. The sculpture is made from a reticular plywood base underneath a teetering mound of poured white foam. It sits atop the wooden table, flanked on either side by a black and white Yamaha 240w speaker. Casting light over the entire installation, a large reading lamp is placed on of the speakers. The viewer is encouraged to walk around this installation and interpret its meaning through the sound broadcast via the iPod on the two speakers:

> No! No! No - o - o - o - o... Ooohhhhhh... I can't understand it... I had an empire in the palm of my hands... It just slipped through my fingers. I can't understand it... I can't understand it...

This recording is taken from the film *Africa Screams* (1949) starring Budd Abbott and Lou Costello. In documenting this work on his website www.alltheorynopractice.com, MacGarry references the following quotes in relation to his sculpture:

> The plan is circular: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower pierced with many windows. The building consists of cells; each has two windows: one in the outer wall of the cell allows daylight to pass into it; another in the inner wall looks onto the tower, or rather is looked upon by the tower, for the windows of the tower are all dark, and the occupants of the cells cannot know who watches, or if anyone watches (Victor Burgin).
>
> …the term proportion, the term mathematics, the term precision… lead to error, for it is not about artistic forms on which mathematical principles are applied, but about obtaining, through fantasy and intuition, forms that in the aesthetic plan, possess similar characteristics (Jorge Romero Brest).

In this work MacGarry has attempted to epitomise the fearful contradictions of decadence so prevalent in this country by taking as his subject Mies van der Rohe's belief in an architecture of 'almost nothing' – a design much loved at the time by developers, as it was simple, quick and cheap to build. In an attempt to expose "White Man's Burden as a fetish" and an example of pseudo-altruism, the speakers and table are intended to look as if they were built by the 'rationalists', who followed Walter Gropius' advocacy of parallel rows of linear blocks. By pouring a teeming mass of white industrial foam onto a wooden frame, the mound is made to look as if it were built by the 'empiricists', who stressed the importance of basic human needs (MacGarry, 2008). This foam is rendered in almost aberrant combinations of dismembered, male genitalia, alluding to themes of impotence or futile, male

destruction, and evoking an affective and provocative response, that again incites the viewer's sadistic impulses to both laugh and find it repulsive. While the fact of the monochrome potentially generates a dialogue on the constitutive process of the sovereignty of cultures from peripheral regions in the face of the Eurocentric means:

> What if the Company's real objective were wealth derived from a trade in bones? The fragile veneer of western civilisation, the great white lie of the White Man's Burden with its implicit, pseudo-altruism (Philip Allingham).
>
> Whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness (Matthew 23:27).
>
> One must desire the ultimate essence even if it is contaminated (Cy Twombly).

The artistic impulses he intends to critique with this work are both self-indulgent and self-annihilating – where feeling or rather, acting 'tortured' is understood as having integrity – ultimately alienating and making the viewer or common man irrelevant.

2.4 The Beautiful and Ugly

Exemplified in the above works, Mbembe's response to Bakhtin has an almost demoralising influence. Describing the vulgarity, obscenity, and parody of a zombified public, he seems to overlook Bakhtin's metaphoric expression of the redemptive and regenerative capacities of folk humour during carnival as an expression of open-ended possibility and transition. It is as a result, at such points where Mbembe's evaluation falls short, that we find many of the artworks under discussion all the more cronguous with Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque. By entirely negating the positive elements of the carnivalesque, the reader loses the peculiar but dynamic sense of ambivalence that is so distinctly communicated throughout the Rabelais text.

For example, it is in this crucial respect of productive ambivalence that Nandipha Mntambo's *Silent Embrace* series (2007) (Figures 16 and 17) truly concurs with Bakhtin's vision. This work comprises eleven, large scale photographs – each documenting a varied translation of the female torso sculpted life-size from treated cowhide to form Mntambo's installation, *Beginning of the Empire* (2007) (Figure 18). These suspended sculptures were, according to the artist, loosely inspired by Peter Magubane's 1968 photograph of mineworkers, naked and raising their arms for inspection.[26] In describing Magubane's photograph and her own work respectively, Mntambo writes:

[26] As a photographic journalist, Magubane was honoured in 1958 with being the first black South African to win a photography prize for *Best Press* picture of the year. Between 1963 and 1964 he worked in London as a freelance photographer and held a solo exhibition of his work. Magubane came back to South Africa in 1966 and worked for the *Rand Daily Mail* from 1967 to 1980. In June of 1969 he was arrested while documenting protestors outside

> These men, who were all naked with their arms up, are lined up in front of a long wall. At a glance one cannot tell them apart, one barely notices differing their heights, they seem to be the same age and they all seem to have a similar expression on their faces. They are vulnerable in their nakedness, their position and without individuality. My work consists of eleven casts of my mother in a similar stance. This seemingly submissive action of standing with ones hands raised, exposing one's body, is disrupted by the way the 'performance' is decoded through the interpretation in cow hide. The figures that are produced from the moulds of my mother, instead of looking passive have the capacity to become confrontational and threatening in their monumental presence (2007).

The decision to include two of these prints in *The New Spell* was one of necessity because the sculptures themselves are extremely coveted by South African collectors and thus fiercely protected by those local galleries representing Mntambo's work. If the sculptures had in fact been more accessible, their extreme fragility, coupled with the sizeable volume they would require for crating and shipping overseas may also have proved problematic (together with the added complications of strict exchange rulings related to health and safety in shipping animal hides). However, this is not to say that *Silent Embrace* as series of photographic prints fall short in their capacity to compel the viewer's attention. Photographed by Mntambo's frequent collaborator, Tony Meintjies these photographs take on a commanding quality quite separate from the sculptures. What they may lack in visceral quality they compensate for in their tremendous size. Each of the hides, photographed from an assertive frontal position, appears at least thirty percent larger in print. The superior quality of both the print and paper also adds to the fine textural nature of the works.

The hides themselves are moulded over casts of Mntambo's and her mother's bodies and then tanned by the artist in her studio to produce hollow, bodice-like forms that when exhibited are usually suspended from above in mid-air, or supported by a chair or wall. It is these strangely evocative hides that invoke the female body and the garments that are sewn out of them that make up the bulk of Mntambo's early work.

> They need to be hard and rigid; they don't smell like leather, they smell like a cow (Mntambo, 2007).

Mntambo's use of conceptually loaded material of cowhide works with an effectiveness of surface to create an almost instinctive response in the viewer, creating a tension between a range of categories: the

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Winnie Mandela's jail cell. After days of interrogation and solitary confinement, the charges were dropped a year later but he was banned from taking any photographs for five years. In 1971 he was arrested again for a similar offence, spent 98 days in solitary confinement, and was then jailed for six months. From June through to August of 1976 he documented the Soweto student uprisings, was arrested again, then released in December of 1976. From 1978 until 1980 he was employed as a correspondent for *Time magazine*. Then, in 1980 left South Africa to live in New York. (Source: http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/magubane-p.htm)

masculine and feminine, nature and culture, and the beautiful and obscene. In this way her sculptures work to subvert the expectations of both human and animal, transgressing the rules of ideal beauty but again depending on those rules for their impact. Cowhide as a medium also raises questions around the often-conflated issues of blackness, nature and femininity. The use of human-animal hybrids can perhaps be interpreted as a way of debasing or dematerialising the purely human bodily form. In their exclusion of heads, arms and legs the female forms also evoke longstanding issues of female subjugation and trauma in Africa. As a result, readings of Mntambo's work have often centered on the traditional practice of 'lobola' (bride-price) in South Africa, criticised by feminists for reducing women to the level of possessions.[27] Although these issues do play a part in Mntambo's attraction to the medium, it seems somewhat reductive to read her production only in these terms. Instead, Mntambo reiterates a sense of agency in the following statement relating to *Silent Embrace*:

> Through the interpretation of my own and my mother's bodies, I have taken control of their representation, and directed the way in which viewers encounter these forms in both their material realisation and installation. The figures, although hanging, have assertiveness in their posture and are intended to be sensuous but ambiguous in their presence. While these fragments of female form may elicit repulsion, it is repulsion intended to evoke the residue of life and the actual presence of the corporeal rather than the female body as victim, damaged, abused or abject (2007).[28]

In her purposeful manipulation of the female form, Mntambo thus aims to control the way in which she is represented. *Indlovukati* (2007) (Figure 19), for example, reminiscent of a cocktail dress in shape, is realised with an almost Baroque sense of poise, grace and movement. In filling out the vacated body of the cow, then vacating it again or re-embodying it herself, she utilises the semantic layering embedded in her material to flesh out, exaggerate and ultimately deflate the terms which have kept people in subjugated states of embodiment. The arguments that backed up the discourse of racism and sexism have long been discredited, however, their semantic legacy continues to haunt contemporary culture. It is this ghosting that Mntambo points to with her sculptures but one that occurs on more than a single level. Unable to fully capture the body that once filled them, Mntambo notes how each incarnation of

[27] Lobola or bride price, also known as bride wealth, is an amount of money, property or other form of wealth paid to the parents of a woman for the right to marry their daughter. In anthropological literature bride price has often been explained in market terms, as payment made in exchange for the bride's family's loss of her labour and fertility within her kinship group. It may also be understood as a gift from the groom to his new bride's family. In this sense it is a substantial gesture of goodwill in the forging of the new unity of the lineages. Unfortunately, the voluntary nature of gift giving in the case of bride price has often been lost as the practice became a requirement for marriage. The tradition has in many instances been used as method of exploiting the bride's family or alternatively proves itself burdensome to the modern couple.
(Source: http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Bride_price)

[28] Cited from the monograph, *Nandipha Mntambo* published on the occasion of Mntambo's first solo exhibition, *Ingabisa*, 2007 at Michael Stevenson, Cape Town. Images of the works are accompanied by an essay written by Bettina Malcomess.

the hide leaves its mark, a residual impression on the form. The impressions, pulls, scars and even tears bear witness, haunting the outline of the hide to demonstrate the traumas of its various manifestations.

This dislocated representation of the body is by no means a novel practice. The human subject as a discreet entity has long been replaced by postmodern and post-colonial ideas of fragmented bodies and decentered subjects. For many South Africans the body is identified as a highly politicised site of contention, oppression, prejudice and emancipation (Christofides, 2003:12). With the core of apartheid binary discourse built around the body, separating our corporeality from our legacies of racial and sexual oppression seems an almost impossibility. As a result, many artists have incorporated notions of embodiment into their art-making processes in an attempt to tackle the many issues around identity and representation.[29]

Embodiment can be described as a primordial, universal and natural element of human existence. It is *how* we are embodied that differs from culture to culture. The differences between our ways of embodiment may be subtle, but their significance and various meanings can be limitless. It is often the recognising of difference that best provides us with an opportunity to reflect back on the meaning and origin of our different ways of bodily being in the world. Grotesque or transformed bodies, as a corporal way of relating to the world, provide a clear illustration of ways in which people shape their personal bodies into public and cultural ones (Christofides, 2003:12). It is by trying to grasp why, for example, someone would desire a body covered in tattoos or why an artist would deform his represented subject into an almost unrecognisable state that we are invited into some kind of reflection on the matter.[30]

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[29] A host of resultant variations on the subject of embodiment can be cited. For example, in his research report, *The Critical Problematising of Sexual and Gender Identity in the work of Clive van den Berg and Steven Cohen* David Brodie explores the ways in which the work of Clive van den Berg and Steven Cohen utilises public and personal spaces in their formulations of embodiment. These explorations of self, both as conscious being and as a physical body, are intended to challenge previous formulations of identity (2001).

The use of Hair as a Manifestation of Cultural and Gender Identity in the Works of Tracy Rose by Lee-At Meyerov demonstrates the artist's use of her own culturally specific hair and body as a metaphor through which she critically engages with issues surrounding the gendered and racialised body. These explicit categories of art-related research evidence the wide scope of exploration around embodiment and identity specific to South African culture (2006).

[30] Cases of research surrounding specific notions of embodied abjection and the subversive message within the work of South African artists are also many and varied. Artist, Jane Alexander can, I would argue, be considered instrumental in shaping the grotesque tradition within three-dimensional practice in South Africa. Through the creation of abject or separate worlds, her sculptures emerge as a commentary on the social and political mechanics that drive a particularly violent South African society. In her dissertation, *Aspects of Violence and Disquietude in Late Twentieth-Century Three-Dimensional Human Figuration* she examines these concerns within her own works and the sculptured works of a selection of her contemporaries (Cooper, 2002:15) *The Grotesque as it Appears in Selected Sculptures by Jane Alexander* by Paul Stephen Cooper investigates the grotesque within Alexander's work, specifically as it is inflected through ambiguous and multivalent meanings that surface through an unsettling experience of the uncanny.[30] Artist, Steven Cohen has also played an important role in his incorporation of the abject into his contentious performances. In her research report, *Embodying Prejudice: Abjection in the Performance Art of Steven Cohen*, Liza Christofides discusses Cohen's work in terms of, amongst other things, issues of homophobia, through articulating and 'making public' issues of sexual difference. (Christofides, 2003:3) More recently, the notion of embodied abjection has merged with a litigious sense of candour and wit in the work of artists such as Johannes Phokela, Nicholas Hlobo, Bitterkomix (Conrad Botes and Anton Kannemeyer) and Avant Car Guard.

In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* Mary Douglas expands on these rules, rituals and practices that regulate the body by suggesting the body as a metaphor for social structure:

> …a model, which can stand for any, bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries, which are threatened or precarious (Douglas, 1996:121).

Douglas argues that both the body and society are most vulnerable at their margins, for it is in the areas on indeterminacy, where symbolic meaning threatens to collapse. Rules, such as those determining the ideal female form, regulate the body's boundaries and function metaphorically for symbolic cultural boundaries, which through the construction of binary opposing categories of purity and pollution implement powerful taboos in which all that is defined as dangerous, impure or threatening is expelled from society. Douglas centers her discussion around the abject concept of 'dirt' as 'matter out of place', which arouses cultural anxiety and revulsion, not because it possesses the properties of contamination or filth, but because it signifies a perpetual state of ambiguity and transgression, belonging to neither one category nor the other, but instead hovering obscurely between the two.[31]

The grotesque image, as Bakhtin repeatedly asserts, is one that emphasises the incompletion of the human body.[32] For all its gross materiality, the grotesque body is therefore also figurative: standing on the "threshold of the grave and the crib," it serves as a sign of particular temporality-of the moment when the old is making way for the new (Bakhtin, 1984:26). This vision, between life and death, is captured in *Silent Embrace* with the use of recognisable, corporeal but aberrant, human and animal, bodily components that function also as a means of exploring aspects of passive control and feminine beauty. Exposing female sexuality as a social construct within the artist's experience of a specifically South African context, the work also captures the hopefulness inherent in the human capacity for change. Central to this body of work is the concept of the boundary, particularly as something that constantly shifts and mutates, that is never fixed or static. The boundary between corporeal awareness and revulsion is again explored through the artist's use of raw cowhides, tails and ears, which are cured

[31] When outside or detached from the body, bodily fluids and wastes, along with skin, hair and nails are attributed with dangerous and strangely powerful qualities. Douglas proposes that they are interpreted as bits of discarded body, which are no longer part of the body, but that remain symbolically linked to it in some way. These tainted waste products remain representative of the whole to which they were once attached (1996:122).

[32] In comparing Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque with theorist William Kayser's, an opposition in their evaluative accents becomes apparent that should be noted. Bakhtin advocates a joyous view of the grotesque as an opportunity for renewal, involving laughter, whilst Kayser generally associates it with the frightening and sinister. One must consider that Bakhtin, as a victim of oppressive totalitarianism, wrote *Rabelais* in the 1930's under constant threat of imprisonment and due to continuous political unrest in Russia only managed to publish in the 1960's. Aligning himself with the marginalised and celebrating the grotesque for its egalitarianism becomes an understandable consequence compared with Kayser who used the grotesque as an aesthetic category in the Romantic period to reflect the psychological alienation one experiences in the face of a world which no longer conforms to traditional categories and dichotomous distinctions.
(Source: http://davidlavery.net/Grotesque/Pages/Theory/Kayser.html)

and sculpted. In this way her sculptures can be described as both penetrative, evocative and even hermaphroditic forms that speak of pure potential.

This relationship between the grotesque and an awareness of the gross physicality of the human body, its participation in the animal world, is well established. In most instances, the grotesque body is described as neither ugly nor beautiful, but in a state of constant transformation. It somehow falls outside of the standard or classical systems of representational classification. The human body in a state of change is thus placed outside the accepted norm and structure of the ideal bodily canon established by the Classical Greeks and Romans. Russo elaborates:

> …transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek; it is identified with the "high" or official culture of the Renaissance and later, with rationalism, individualism and normalising aspirations of the bourgeoisie. Incomplete, deformed or wounded bodies are thus abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics and consequently described as monstrous and grotesque (Russo, 1995:8).

Connelly quotes Jeffrey Jerome Cohen:

> The monstrous body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy, giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically that which reveals, that which warns (2003: 19).

> The grotesque body … is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world… This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body, in which it conceives a new body: the bowels and the phallus. These two areas play the leading role in the grotesque image and it is precisely for this reason that they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolisation; they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life… Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body – all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the old and the new body (Bakhtin, 1984:317).

Used and produced from a 'marginalised' perspective, Mntambo's hides thus demonstrate an affiliation for a Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque in that they convey a certain libratory tone and effect. Furthermore, their grotesqueness takes on new significance when used to address the female form, as opposed to the largely male variety explored by MacGarry and Shibase. The central image of Bakhtinian

grotesque realism is the grotesque body that interacts with the world. However politically incorrect the notion, Bakhtin suggests that not only do women interact more with the world (menstruation, pregnancy, and birth), but that the female body is already displaced and marginalised within social relations since it is often a body that must either conform to a set of regulated norms or be dismissed as Other. Mntambo notes how each incarnation of the hide leaves its mark, a residual impression on the form. The impressions, pulls, scars and even tears bear witness, haunting the outline of the hide to demonstrate the traumas of its various manifestations. Whilst it can be said that in both works Mntambo alludes to an emancipatory grotesque and a sense of female empowerment, she does so without the over idealisation so prevalent in Bakhtin's text. It is unclear whether her figures are awaiting some kind of salvation, or seeking a hiding place from an unknown terror. While the exposed forms can be interpreted gestures of submission, there is also a certain sensuality and beauty to them, imbuing them with an undeniable sense of agency.

Her latest works are the start of a long-term project around the theme of bullfighting, as well as the artist's first foray into performance and video. This attempt to take on the persona of the bullfighter represents a shift for Mntambo, whose previous work effectively invited the viewer to take her place, to step into the outline of her body as defined by the moulded cowhide. Through a series of processes – the bull's head, she found at the abattoir, was white and had to be dyed black – and in collaboration with photographer Tony Meintjes, she morphs into a bull with a new heightened sense of physicality. Through the resultant works such as *Europa* (2008) (Figure 20) she makes reference to the patriarchal sport still associated with a colonial era under Portuguese rule in Mozambique. The now abandoned Praca de Touros in Maputo is a bullfighting arena where black Mozambicans once fought for the entertainment of the Portuguese. In Portugal the sport is still practiced, but remains strictly male. In an effort to unseat classical, and contemporary, representations of woman, and challenge the patriarchal nature of the game, Mntambo borrows from Greek mythology and the story of the young Europa seduced by Zeus disguised as a bull.

In *Europa* she has conflated the three characters in the story: She becomes the young woman, the seducer and the monster all at once in Pasiphae, the wife of Minos, son of Europa and Zeus, giving birth to a Minotaur (Wenner, 2008:12). Her movement between boundaries bull/cow, god/goddess and animal/human is further traversed by the sexual divide, adopting characteristics of the bullish Zeus as opposed to being ravished by him. Exercising the grotesque with carnival practices that include a diffusion of hierarchy to question existing social constructs; and the creation of a unique, absurd world, *Europa* continues Mntambo's interrogation of uneven relations of power. This image becomes iconic within her oeuvre, exploring issues of sexuality, male/female, internal/public conflict and the thin line between the repulsive and attractive. Mary Corrigall extends this notion:

> This work articulates themes and ideas that extend beyond her identity as a black female. In assuming the roles of both Europa and the bull, Mntambo subverts what could have been a

> dialogue between the self and the other into a discourse with the self and divergent aspects of the self. In this way, Mntambo is both aggressor and victim, male and female, coloniser and colonised. Given that she tries to shirk fixed notions of identity through this work, it seems ironic that it would find its way to an exhibition that pigeonholes her as a black woman. (2009).

In summary, Mntambo manages to overturn a host of exploitative hierarchies ascribed to the black, female identity as a corporeal object of subjugation, impurity and sexual stereotypification. Her works effectively embody positive aspects of the grotesque to disrupt notions of the ideal female form or classical body in an alternative celebration of its boundaries and excrescences. As a subtle form of experimentation, the carnivalesque in Mntambo's work opens the way to a critical reassessment of the fixation on simplistic attributes of identity, gender roles and constructions of social space.

2.5 Laughter and Catharsis

This section attempts to bring my research on carnivalesque production in South Africa to a close by considering the carnivalesque as an expression of social desire. For the many artworks anaylsed throughout this research, the carnivalesque performs a protective role that allows artists to challenge, at least temporarily, peripheral political correctness and perhaps more importantly internal forms of censorship and constraints. Through temporary absences of power and the re-conquest of the public space or spectacle, mechanisms of the carnivalesque function as symbolic alternatives for articulating new ideas or enabling the revitalisation of an already established concept. In this context, the relationship between the carnivalesque and play, pleasure and the taboos associated with them need to be further examined.

Although some theorists consider playfulness, laughter and the carnivalesque as representative of "low culture", others see these kinds of pleasures as catalysts. Play, for example, can be viewed as a vehicle for social integration, the carnivalesque as a strategy of subversive political articulation and humour used to the benefit of resistance. Arguments for and against a culture of laughter and pleasure have been the subject of much dispute. The very existence of festivals, play and carnivals clearly suggest that there is a social desire to create a "different" or externalised space. The aspect of play also appears to be a constant throughout our cultural history. Humour and play have often been used in the arts as strategies for the presentation of issues of social relevance.[33]

[33] That said, the only survey exhibition on humour specific to South African art can be cited in the form of a proposal for the 2007 Venice Biennale entitled, *Punch-Line: Humour and Hurt in Contemporary African Art* written by Prof. Colin Richards and published as an edited extract in Art South Africa. The proposed selection of artists included Lara Baladi, Samuel Fosso, Nicholas Hlobo, Mona Marzouk, Wangechi Mutu, Tracy Rose, Penny Siopis, Barthelemy Tuguo and Sue Williamson.

For the 2004 Shedhalle exhibition, *Spectacle, Pleasure Principle or the Carnivalesque* in Zurich, curators quote Dutch historian Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens. Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel (Homo Ludens. A study of the Play-Elements in Culture)* (1938) in which he argues that religion as well as art, sports or magic, and ultimately all culture, trace their origins to play. We are aware that we are playing, and for that very reason we play with a "sacred earnest" that sometimes causes us to take the game more seriously than life itself. In much the same way, curators cite Robert Pfaller's description of this relationship between play and earnestness:

> The pleasure we derive from fiction and the knowledge that it is fiction belong together. The emotional and intellectual aspects do not exclude one another; on the contrary the one presupposes the other. There is no pleasure without better knowledge (Pfaller as quoted for *Spectacle, Pleasure Principle or the Carnivalesque*, Zurich, 2004)

Thus, it is this ambivalence between awareness of the playful character of an action, on the one hand, and simultaneous seduction by the illusion, on the other, that appears to generate pleasure and hence a feeling of catharsis. Like playfulness, the carnivalesque is a vehicle for the realisation of the social desire for an externalised space. They create:

> … a space beyond the pale of representational order by subversively questioning the constructed images with which power is maintained and legitimised. A position can be taken within society that opens a view of society from the outside. This paradoxical constellation raises the question of how a space can be marked out, which enables people to experience the "self" as the "otherness" and the internal as the external. Crucial in this context is the matter of dealing with taboo. For violations of taboos are based on disturbances in expectations and social agreements; and it is these disturbances that make the perception of taboos possible in society and which foster reflection. In this sense, taboos and violations of taboos serve as an interface between inside and outside, self-perception and the perception of others. They promote the building of community by drawing a boundary between the "self" and the "Other", and thus provide the artist with subversive ways to explore cultural identity. (*Spectacle, Pleasure Principle or the Carnivalesque*, Zurich, 2004)

A masters thesis written by Anna Magrieta van Tonder entitled, *On the Serious Implications of Humorous Art* published by UNISA Press in 2007 can also be cited. Van Tonder's paper makes explicit the differences between modern and postmodern humour by comparing the humorous works of eighteenth century English artist William Hogarth with the works of American postmodern artist Cindy Sherman. This comparison draws attention to the various ways in which Hogarth's humour sustains and propagates modern correspondence thinking by ridiculing certain aspects of the world he lives in; as opposed to Sherman who employs humour to reinvent meaning by completely subverting the icons and ideologies representative of correspondence thinking. Thereafter, van Tonder relates her findings to her own creative practice. This thesis provides some interesting exploratory theoretical analysis on contemporary uses of humour within the arts, however its relevance is largely international with a limited amount of scrutiny on its novel presence in recent local production.

MacGarry's *Spiderman* (2003) (Figure 1) plays with parallel taboos around the ambiguous notions of "belonging" and "otherness" and the need for an externalised space particular to the South African urban experience. Featured on *The New Spell*, this large-format photograph shows a person of male build standing atop a Johannesburg building at mid-day with the city's skyline in the background. The subject is dressed in a black shirt and dark blue jacket with a paper bag over his head. The paper bag has eight holes in it. According to the artist, this work concerns a refiguring of the Modernist-era, American superhero *Spider-Man* within the contextual specifics of Johannesburg – the "New York of Africa" (MacGarry, 2008). The title of the project also references the numerical value of eyeholes in the paper bag mask; Marvel's arachnid protector of New York City and the likes of other superheroes of the same era such *The Invisible Man*, *The Elephant Man*, *Batman* and *Superman*.

Acquiescent in posture and with a paper bag over his head, one feels as if this Spiderman is both hiding something of a grotesque physical nature and embarrassed of his anomalous position atop a high-rise in downtown Johannesburg:

> A small part of him thinks the mask would not be as necessary if he were standing atop the affluent Sandston City Tower to the north of the city – still a freak but also a bastion or rent-a-cop of the corporate world. But, like his namesake in New York, this Spiderman is equally the savior of the metropolis as he is its captive. What can Spiderman do in the suburbs? Robbed of the skyscrapers that allow rapid mobility and cinematic vistas, this low-rise terrain belongs to the ubiquitous electric fences, boom gates and cruising security guards of the northern suburbs. He is both threatened by and threatening to 'faceless' urban crime – provoked by an insecure, defensive reaction to an environment perceived as hazardous, with the mask as a form of his own transportable refuge. The original Peter Parker lived in the suburbs, went to high school and after being bitten by a spider mutated into the first superhero to be born without his powers. His turf later became the skyscrapers of Manhattan as the protector of the metropolitan public.
>
> As the construction of suburban ordinary and metropolitan extraordinary so defined Peter Parker's life, this Spiderman is equally duplicitous. Like so many, he 'works' in downtown Johannesburg and lives in the leafy northern suburbs – a captive of the former and a product of the latter (MacGarry, 2008).

Such a work brings us to the social desire for an externalised space of both carnivalesque expression and spectacle. There are in every culture real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which can be described as counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Read in a Bakhtinian sense, these can be described as carnivalesque spaces. One may ask, where one could find the resistance potential of the carnivalesque space in contemporary society?

Such transient suspension of taboos can be located in media strategies, religions, situations of emergency, scientific discourses and even transition phases. According to Debord, it is primarily the media that produce the carnivalesque and collective spectacle. Our economies of power produce the spectacle, institutionalize it in a target-specific way, ritualise it, and mediate it. The dominance of the media in the carnivalesque leads to the question of public space, which is increasingly relocated into the domain of the media. It seems as if we are permanently pursued by the public domain, even if we are not in a public space. On the one hand, we can participate in great spectacles of fun culture in private, in front of the TV or maybe on the Internet, without being physically present. The non-public carnivalesque, on the other hand, can enable collective participation through media broadcasts: this is why the media has invented formats like *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, turning mass media into a stage. Furthermore, there is the question of how much political stages are turned into the carnivalesque and into spectacles in the same way: politics as entertainment or politics in talk show format by making politics personal, entertaining, fictitious and emotional.

A photographic still, entitled *La Tenda Rossa* (2004) (Figure 2) from one of MacGarry's proposed films of the same name, attempts an exploration of the architecture, space and the media nature of this carnivalesque spectacle. This work playfully and articulately addresses the social desire for an externalised spectacle or carnivalesque counter-site. MacGarry's macabre violation of certain taboos within the implied *Survivor* narrative disturbs our expectations and throws us into reflection – drawing a boundary between viewer and subject, "self" and "Other", one is presented with a subversive and interrogative questioning of European versus African cultural identity.

The large-format, monochromatic print, exhibited in *The New Spell*, shows a white duvet piled up in the shape of a precipitous, snow-covered mountain. There is an almost meditative feel to the minimalist composition of this work, which speaks of the fated 1926 expedition led by the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen (who in 1910 became the first man to reach the South Pole) and the American adventurer Lincoln Ellsworth (who had crossed the North Pole in a dirigible piloted by General Umberto Nobile).[34]

[34] MacGarry elaborates on the expedition:

> Had not Richard Byrd, three days before, made his controversial claim to have reached the North Pole in an aeroplane, Nobile's would have been the first flight over it. In 1928, encouraged by Mussolini's regime, Nobile made plans for another voyage to the North Pole in a newly designed dirigible the Italia, which he hoped would land at the Pole and return to base at Spitsbergen, as well as explore the still largely uncharted frozen landmass. Nobile made thorough preparations, including the selection of a potential rescue party of nine Alpine soldiers, chosen for their expertise in the snow. Having started in Milan, the Italia reached the North Pole on May 24, 1928, on board was a crew of sixteen. High winds prevented the Italia from landing, and then, as the crew began their return to base, an elevator jammed, causing the dirigible to lose hydrogen.
>
> The craft gradually became heavier, and 180 miles from base it began to drop with increasing velocity towards the ice. The resulting crash separated the gondola from the hydrogen envelope, which with six men inside, drifted upwards out of sight and was never found again. There were nine survivors of the crash, almost all had multiple broken bones. After ten days on the ice floe, their SOS appeal was heard by a Russian farmer listening on ham radio, and half a dozen nations, including Norway and Soviet Russia, sent out search parties. Their efforts to locate Nobile's party were, however, largely uncoordinated, and nine of the rescuers lost their own lives, most notably Amundsen, whose aircraft disappeared over the Arctic Ocean

MacGarry envisions his proposed film, *La Tenda Rossa* as a theoretical conclusion to the recent media-spectacle reality television *Survivor* series.[35] He proposes it as a reframing of the failed imperial project that was Gen. Nobile's attempt to land the dirigible Italia at the North Pole in 1928. He chooses the arctic as a completely irrational proposed location so as to comment on *Survivor's* ceaseless search for new and dangerous frontiers. Now in its fifteenth season, the *Survivor* series has successfully managed to replace its romantic predecessors based to a large degree on the idea of being deserted on an idyllic tropical island such as the adventures of the Swiss Family Robinson or Robinson Crusoe.

La Tenda Rossa parodies this endless search for 20th century exploration and cites adventurers such as Mike Horn on his surfboard in the Amazon River, Sir Richard Branson endlessly attempting to the same in a hot air balloon or Sir Ranulph Fiennes walking across the Antarctic continent. He considers these endeavours to have a tragedy to them vastly different from the loss of life that characterised earlier exploration and describes them as pointless of purpose and due only to man's rare "combinations of stupidity, narcissism and danger" (2008). Rightly so, one marvels at this strange Western phenomenon perpetuated in a nostalgic attempt to discover 'new worlds', where the contemporary manifestation translates somewhat disappointingly into indirectly sponsored projects, where the large corporate replaces the "man-of-history-template that so characterised the first half of the previous century. It is no longer the individual, with nation-state support, cataloguing vast tracts of terrain for his mother country

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> The Italians were slow to respond, the petty jealousies of the army, navy and air ministries meant that Nobile's rescue party of nine Alpine soldiers were not permitted to scout for the survivors until June 3rd, when they set out in two-man patrols. These patrols were sent to investigate a possible location of the "red tent", as Nobile's camp became known, from the aniline dye he had smeared on his bivouac in the hope of making it more visible. (*The Red Tent* was used as the title of the 1971 film about the expedition and rescue, starring Peter Finch as Nobile and Sean Connery as Amundsen). On June 12, much to the soldiers' frustration, a dispute between the service ministries led to their being recalled to the ship. Not until a week later did an Italian pilot manage to locate the red tent and drop supplies. Nobile was then picked up by a Swedish flier, but the aeroplane crashed when the Swede returned for the others and he had himself to be rescued.
>
> The remaining five survivors, by now stranded on a rapidly melting floe, were finally taken aboard a Russian icebreaker after spending 49 days in the icy wastes. Three survivors had set off earlier to try to walk to Spitsbergen, only two were later found by plane, one of their number having dug his own grave in the ice before lying down to die. The fact that the other two had survived for another twelve days without food led some to believe that they had subsequently dug up their companion and eaten him. In all eighteen men died during Nobile's expedition, and the subsequent rescue efforts. Nobile's rescue party of nine Alpine soldiers was hailed as heroes on return to Italy, where the Fascist press otherwise portrayed the expedition as a serious blow to national pride. Nobile, however, was vilified and he ultimately emigrated to Russia. His reputation was not restored until after the fall of Mussolini. (www.alltheorynopractice.com, 2009).

[35] The proposed *La Tenda Rossa* is a 20-30 minute short film shot on HD video in colour with stereo sound. The film will feature eight principle characters gradually reduced in number (as they gradually die of thirst and starvation) to five, then three, then two. The cast will be white, North American males between the ages of 18 and 50. The look and feel of the film will be that of a contemporary television programme – the context and wardrobe will support the latter. With the narrative representing a 'highlights package' of a standard, eight week *Survivor* series – but there is no voice-over narration and few highlights. *La Tenda Rossa* represents a fictional, 'themed' *Survivor* series, in the mode of *Survivor: Pearl Islands*. The link between the Arctic setting and the title of Nobile's 1928 tragedy is merely applied, it is a superimposed theme – although the location, number of contestants and duration of the survivor's involvement do link back to the original historical event (MacGarry, 2008).

– today it's the heavily-sponsored and media-savvy man motivated by misdirected ego, ambition and boredom" (MacGarry, 2008).

What is fascinating to MacGarry about *Survivor*, as an example of American spectacle and ultimately a marketable product, is that the series presents the viewer with a particularly warped version of any natural survival situation. As opposed to searching for safety and rescue, the *Survivor* contestants are given the brief of maintaining their situations of malnutrition and vulnerability to the elements for as long as they can endure, so as to ultimately be the "the last man standing" and win the competition. MacGarry frankly reduces this narrative to taking sixteen Americans to a remote location, dividing them into two groups and asking them to live in shacks, bicker, eat poorly and then give the last remaining one million dollars (2008). It is also necessary to note that while all this action unfolds, a film crew is continually interrupting the participants, art directing their movements and interactions for capturing the best possible raw footage. Once the filming is wrapped, the footage begins a further journey of editing and manipulation in order to be broadcast to millions of people through a process of syndicated licensing. MacGarry's contention is that although this viewership is almost immeasurable, there exists a far greater number of people that do not have the means to watch television. Rather than 'play' survivor, they have to live it – but without any possibility of reward or media attention (2008).



The New Spell exhibition invitation

Themba Shibase
Michael MacGarry
Nandipha Mntambo
Robyn Nesbitt & Nina Barnett

Born in 1980 in Port Shepstone, KwaZulu-Natal, Themba Shibase is a Durban-based artist. He currently lectures in the Department of Fine Art at Durban University of Technology where he is pursuing his Master s in Fine Art. Shibase has recently been selected as one of four finalists to participate in the 2008 MTN New Contemporaries exhibition. Practicing mainly in the areas of painting and drawing, he interrogates new identities within an urban context. His works are based on the relationships between traditional cultural manifestations and the contemporary world. The notion of identity allows Shibase to negotiate the relationship between his role as an educated, urban black male, and his ancestral heritage.

My work focuses on a variety of issues centred on identity politics (particularly racial identity) within the context of an urbanised environment. Through my work I interrogate the often stereotyping and homogenising notion of authentic African culture which is perpetuated by perspectives of Africa informed by the colonial gaze. My work is inspired by my daily encounters with city life. This wide subject matter covers things like newspaper articles, television, conversations with friends and sometimes fellow Africans from other regions of the continent, to simple things that are found on the streets as evidence or trace of people's occupation of the city.

Solo Exhibitions

2008 *Umhlaba Kabani/ Whose land?*, Erdmann Contemporary, Cape Town

2005 *D'Urban Critique*, KZNSA Gallery, Durban

Selected Group Exhibitions

2008 *Spier Contemporary*, Johannesburg Art Gallery

2007 *Spier Contemporary*, Stellenbosch

2006 *From Here to There*, AVA Gallery, Cape Town
Form and Substance, Erdmann Contemporary, Cape Town
New Painting, KZNSA Gallery, Durban / UNISA Gallery and Johannesburg Art Gallery

2005 *Surface*, Franchise Gallery, Johannesburg
Being Here, KZNSA Gallery, Durban
Red Eye, Durban Art Gallery

2004 *Black*, KZNSA Gallery, Durban
The Legacy of Trevor Makhoba, BAT Centre, Durban

4



Wena Wendlovu (Big Al)
Oil and acrylic on canvas . 1750 x 960 mm . 2008

5

Themba Shibase
Michael MacGarry
Nandipha Mntambo
Robyn Nesbitt & Nina Barnett



The Economy of Modernity
Industrial foam, wood, brass, enamel paint . 1000 x 600 mm . 2005

Michael MacGarry was born in Durban in 1978. On a full scholarship he graduated with a Master s in Fine Art (with distinction) from the University of the Witwatersrand in 2005. Recipient of an Individual Artist Grant from the National Arts Council of South Africa in 2004, he was recently shortlisted for the 2008 MTN New Contemporaries Award. MacGarry s work concerns the mechanics of control and vested interest that inform the journey of culturally symbolic languages and products from the so-called centre to the periphery (and vice-versa) via established global trade routes that define and manipulate the peripheral context through an insidious process of inclusion and exclusion. MacGarry is also a member of Johannesburg-based art collective *AVANT CAR GUARD*.

"My work concerns the ongoing ramifications of imperialism within the African continent."

Solo Exhibitions

2008 *When enough people start saying the same thing*, Art Extra, Johannesburg
True/Story, KZNSA Gallery, Durban

2005 *Or Until the World Improves*, Premises Gallery, Johannesburg

Selected Group Exhibitions

2008 *6x6*, Rooke Gallery, Johannesburg
The Trickster, Art Extra, Johannesburg

2007 *Impossible Monsters*, Art Extra, Johannesburg
Right Before Your Eyes, KZNSA Gallery, Durban

2005 *Group Therapy*, Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg
.Dwg, Outlet Gallery, University of Tshwane
BWM Showroom, IFS Centre, Johannesburg

2003 *Low Rider*, Polvo Art Center, Chicago

2000 *Outpost*, KZNSA Gallery, Durban
!Xoe Site-Specific, Nieu-Bethesda

Images appear courtesy the artist and Art Extra, Johannesburg.

8



La Tenda Rossa
Inkjet print on cotton paper . 1200 x 800 mm . 2004 . Edition: 5

9

Artist pages from *The New Spell* online catalogue

Themba Shibase
Michael MacGarry
Nandipha Mntambo
Robyn Nesbitt & Nina Barnett

Born in Swaziland in 1982, Nandipha Mntambo graduated with a Master s in Fine Art (with distinction) from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, in June 2007. In 2005 she was the recipient of the Brett Kebble Art Awards Curatorial Fellowship, and in 2006 she was one of five young artists selected for the MTN New Contemporaries exhibition, curated by Khwezi Gule at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Mntambo has developed a distinctive aesthetic through her use of cowhide, which she tans and moulds onto casts of the female body usually her own. She purchases the hide as raw as possible in order to engage fully with the material its smell and textures causing revulsion but also provoking a consciousness of the corporeal. In this way Mntambo challenges and subverts preconceptions regarding representation of the female body, disrupting perceptions of attraction and repulsion.

"Through the interpretation of my own and my mother's body, I have taken control of their representation, and directed the way in which viewers encounter these forms in both their material realisation and installation. The figures, although hanging, have assertiveness in their posture and are intended to be sensuous but ambiguous in their presence. While these fragments of female form may elicit repulsion, it is repulsion intended to evoke the residue of life and the actual presence of the corporeal rather than the female body as victim, damaged, abused or abject."

Solo Exhibitions

2007 *Ingabisa*, Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town
Locating me in order to see you (Master's exhibition), Michaelis Gallery, Cape Town

Selected Group Exhibitions

2008 *Dak'art*, Dakar Biennale, Senegal
Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire
Skin-to-skin: Challenging Textile Art, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg
.za: giovane arte dal Sudafrica, Palazzo delle Papesse, Siena
The Trickster, Art Extra, Johannesburg
Summer 2007/8, Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town
Apartheid: The South African Mirror, Centre de Cultura Contempor nia de Barcelona
Afterlife, Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town

2006 *Olvida quien soy – Erase me from who I am*, Centro Atl ntico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas, Gran Canaria
MTN New Contemporaries 2006, Johannesburg Art Gallery
Second to None, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town

2005 *In the Making: Materials and Process*, Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town

Images and artist information appear courtesy Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town.

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Silent Embrace (2)
Digital print on cotton rag paper . 1730 x 910 mm . 2007 . Edition: 5 + 2AP

13

Themba Shibase
Michael MacGarry
Nandipha Mntambo
Robyn Nesbitt & Nina Barnett

Nina Barnett and Robyn Nesbitt have worked on several collaborative projects, primarily using live performance and video installation. The artists received an award for the collaborative video *Warcry* (featured here) at Spier Contemporary 2007. Their work consistently activates the space between a pair of physical entities, using live performance and dual-screen video installation to create polarities and stimulate focused interaction. The relationship between them mirrors the distinct communicative quality in their joint work. Previous collaborative work includes a series of evocative live performances, notably, a piece that featured a thin, body-sized chalkboard, placed in between the artists. For one hour, the artists wrote consistently and uninterrupted, noting every thought and impulse that came to mind. The action was both supportive and competitive, as each artist applied pressure to the board to write more vigorously, but required a similar opposite force to keep the board upright. The tension in this piece was palpable and directly addressed the collaborative relationship, one based on a mutual competitive spirit and tender support.

Born in Johannesburg in 1983, Barnett currently lives in New York. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts (with distinction) from the University of the Witwatersrand in 2006. In 2005 she was awarded the Martienssen Prize and the Giovanna Milner Scholarship, both from the University of the Witwatersrand. In 2007, Barnett received the Gerard Sekoto award at the Absa L'Atelier Awards. Nesbitt was born in 1984, in Johannesburg, and currently lives in Cape Town. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from the University of the Witwatersrand in 2006 where she received the Anya Milner Scholarship in her final year. Nesbitt is pursuing a Masters in Fine Art at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town.

Collaborative Group Exhibitions

2008 *Spier Contemporary*, Johannesburg Art Gallery

2007 *Spier Contemporary*, Stellenbosch

2006 *Kazoo – Play, Action, Intervention in Public and Private Space*, Premises Gallery, Johannesburg

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Warcry
Video installation . Dimensions variable . 2007

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Artist pages from *The New Spell* online catalogue





The New Spell, installation views, 2008



Artist, Nina Barnett (left) and Opening Speaker, Judge Albie Sachs (right), 2008



Opening night, with artist Michael MacGarry (right), 2008

3. CHAPTER THREE –
THE NEW SPELL

3.1. Curatorial Translation

Allowing me to direct an event relevant to my research and in fulfillment of the practical requirement towards this Masters degree, I chose to curate an exhibition, which would further engage carnivalesque strategies of an activist art practice in South Africa. The starting point of this project was a re-reading of the writings of Achille Mbembe's "The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony" (2001). In relating this text to Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of a critical carnivalesque, *The New Spell* can be seen as a small exhibition that goes some way to addressing the universal debate on the positioning of contemporary curating in theoretical and academic contexts in parallel to those of a more mainstream curatorial practice. Using the term 'translation' (rather than 'application') I alert the reader to my awareness of the confinements that arise when a theoretical concept, such as the carnivalesque, is used as justification for decisions of selection and display, rather than a point of departure for pondering a collection of associated works.

Curating is a cross-disciplinary profession that often 'translates' theoretical concepts uncritically into exhibitions that overrate theory. That said, and with their proponents rarely admitting it, cultural theories are often informed and enriched by different curatorial practices (Milevska, 2007:2). What is it that makes curating based on scholarly concepts so different from curating that draws on various art projects that engage with sociopolitical issues and events? It is by simultaneously engaging both models (theoretically/academically and artistically informed curatorial practices) in the curation of this project that I hope to offer some insight into their points of difference, reciprocal influences and potential scope for reconciliation.[36] I ask to what extent the carnivalesque can be considered a creative strategy for articulating certain aspects of the overtraded subject of cultural identity. Thus, to what extent is artistic practice also carnivalesque in the sense of a practice of resistance? In what ways are entertaining, absorbing and activist potentials also evident in such creative practice?

[36] Contemporary curatorial practices have internalised many translational strategies when dealing with a variety of artistic, cultural or theoretical concepts but unavoidably, some intricacies and nuances are lost in this process. Curators often respond to this indictment with the concept of mediating in order to distance themselves from theory. However, this can never be pure distant and neutral intervention because it is already "contaminated" by internalised preconceptions about different arts, cultures and the world in general (Milevska, 2007:2). Because of the inevitable loss of the idealised intricacy that takes place throughout the process of translating of theory into practice, or through "mediating" of these different fields, Milevska address the following questions:

- whether one of the roles of contemporary art curators, to address culturally complex and socially relevant questions, produces more versatile and contextually sensitive truth exactly because of that loss that happens throughout the process of reciprocal translation between theory and practice of curating
- how the processes of translation of various theoretical, cultural, and artistic concepts into specific projects embrace and promote (or betray) the pedagogical and epistemological responsibility (Milevska, 2007).

Conscious of the international surge of exhibitions based on notions of collective or group identity, and the curator's fairly recent role-change from arbiter to cultural mediator (or broker), this show wishes also to comment on the contradictory curatorial readings of "identity" as both a democratising and reductive construct (Milevska, 2007). Curators who, for example, champion artists from marginal African countries claim to have pushed the borders of contemporary art, offering new cultural frontiers, and charting out new identities for previously marginalised groups. Thus, the curator's role of "cultural broker", rather than expanding the parametres for the evaluation and presentation of contemporary artistic practices, merely further complicates them.

> As the debates of recent years have shown, "identity" is not an "essence" that can be translated into a particular set of conceptual or visual traits. It is, rather, a negotiated *construct* that results from the multiple positions of the subject vis-à-vis the social, cultural and political conditions which contain it (Ramirez, 1996:23).

By employing Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque my curatorial intention is to upend those exhibitions or collections that reduce their subjects to essentialist stereotypes by attempting to represent the social, ethnic, political complexities of entire groups. However, it is also to draw attention to the contradiction of the contemporary art curator's dilemma: to tear down art world hierarchies and attempt democratizing the space for cultural action.

In curating this exhibition, artists were approached who I felt would relate to the carnivalesque and who would be able to explore the theme within their usual modes of working. The final selection was asked to submit either existing works or proposals for such.[37] In this way, the brief for participation allowed them to respond creatively to the theme of the exhibition in ways relevant to them and in the context of

[37] Themba Shibase and I established a close working relationship during his time of preparing for the exhibition. He and I discussed many of his preparatory drawings and earlier paintings before making the decision to proceed with a commission of two large-scale paintings featuring as their subjects Al Gaddafi and Charles Taylor. Due to the financial constraints of the exhibition, Shibase was unfortunately unable to attend the event.

The selection of works by Michael MacGarry was made over the course of two months with a significant amount of input from the artist. These interactions were predominantly of the creative sort with much of the logistical administration channeled through the gallery representing his work (Brodie/Stevenson, Johannesburg). It is interesting to note that due to shipping costs MacGarry re-created his sculpture *The Economy of Modernity* (2005) whilst he was in New York, first destroying the original in South Africa.

After requesting the video installation *Warcry* (2007) from Nina Barnett and Robyn Nesbitt, the collaborative duo decided to re-stage and re-film the event in an attempt to improve the sound and visual quality of the original work for exhibition in New York. Fortuitously Barnett, who had previously relocated to New York, was able to be at the gallery during set-up to direct the technical installation of the work.

My interactions with Nandipha Mntambo were unfortunately largely directed through the gallery staff at Michael Stevenson in Cape Town. This was due at the time to her active schedule abroad. Her attendance at the exhibition opening was however of great value.

their previous bodies of work. Artworks were then selected or commissioned that I felt on one hand, succeeded in a playful, subversive kind of provocation, and on the other, demonstrated a new form or culture of reflexive arguing. The final selection was also intended to represent a range of perspectives on the political legacy of South Africa's past and resultant idiosyncratic interpretations of cultural identity.

As the curator, this process of engagement demanded a self-reflexive examination of this political past from artists, curators, and spectators in an attempt to raise awareness of representations that are particular to South African society and of potential interest to an American audience. It was my intention to exhibit a range of works that could be interpreted as a kind of carnivalesque response to issues of cultural identification, enabling the American viewer to 'deconstruct' the generalized representations of the ideological interests underlying South Africa's political past and current situation.

Despite the title of the exhibition, *The New Spell* was not about proposing a new South African elite, marketing a fresh generation of cultural players or about validating particular artistic practices over others. I also did not wish to claim that those who subvert or laugh are necessarily bringing about the collapse of previously established modes of representation. Instead, my aim was to allude to the processes of national and personal identity derision, parody and laughter as possibly demystifying and magical. 'Spell' suggests both the presence of spectacle, fascination and magic – that which requires a creative recipe to transpire – and a period of time specific to our recent political history. It can also be exchanged with the words herald, portend and promise – all confirmatory verbs that one can use to describe a certain shift in tone, to include humour and playfulness within the language of socio-political art in South Africa. 'New' alludes to a carnivalesque opportunity for renewal, giving both the artists and viewers the freedom to envision this alternative approach.

3.2. Exhibition Analysis

The New Spell was installed at David Krut Projects, New York for seven weeks (5 June – 30 July 2008) and involved the same five artists upon whom my research is focused: Nina Barnett, Michael MacGarry, Nandipha Mntambo, Robyn Nesbitt and Themba Shibase. Three of the five artists were able to attend the opening during which they fielded questions from the opening speaker, Judge Albie Sachs, and interacted with the public in discussing their works. The artists were also interviewed on camera by a New York-based SABC (South African Broadcasting Commission) correspondent. The footage was aired a week later in South Africa.

Having worked in a commercial art gallery for the last four years, the need for local galleries to be more proactive in offering their artists exposure abroad and generating foreign public interest in contemporary South African art seems greater than ever. In full acknowledgement of the fact that the location in New

York was available to us because of my own professional involvement in David Krut Projects Johannesburg, my decision to travel the exhibition abroad was partly motivated by the recognition of this need. The gallery is a commercial space or project room situated in amongst another three hundred galleries in the Chelsea district. Here the streets are lined with art galleries and many high-rise buildings have multiple floors of commercial or more experimental spaces. David Krut Projects can be found on the eighth floor of the titanic 526 building on West 26th Street. Within the clearly articulated aim and focus of the exhibition, and the selection of a small number of specifically invited artists, the process of installing the exhibition was purposefully controlled and directed. Not only does this approach permit one the freedom to thoroughly explore the various aspects of the curatorial theme through a process of research and selection, but by limiting the selection of artists to a manageable size, I wanted to draw attention to the accessibility of mainstream curating in commercial galleries abroad and away from the need for all-inclusive South African group shows that often require extensive organising and sponsorship.

Excluding the addition of a small, adjoined alcove, the gallery measures approximately 5 metres wide by 15 metres long (double-volume in height). Each of the ten works on exhibition was positioned within its own generous amount of space, resulting in a reasonably modest, but carefully staged installation. Superbly framed and placed to the right of the front door, MacGarry's photograph *Spiderman* (2003) (Figure 1) alongside *The Classicist* (Figure 3) and *The Father (Reversal of Fortune)* (Figure 4) from his *African Archetypes* series (2007) commanded the viewers' attention first. These works were purposefully placed at the front of the gallery, allowing for their collective sense of theatricality to key the viewer into the overall spectacle character of the exhibition. At the far end of this wall, Shibase's tall portraits *Wena Wendlovu (Big Al)* and *Wena Wendlovu (Taylor the Dictator and Thief)* (2008) (Figures 11 & 12), were placed side-by-side and benefited well from the natural light pouring in from the windows to their right. To the left of these and into the middle of the gallery space, MacGarry's sculpture *The Economy of Modernity* (2005) (Figure 5) commanded the floor. Presented directly on the concrete screed without the aid of any supportive plinth or its accompanying Yamaha speakers (as MacGarry has initially shown the work in Johannesburg in 2005), the sculpture looked all the more immediate.

On the opposite and facing wall, Mntambo's prints *Silent Embrace* (2007) (Figures 16 and 17) were almost overwhelming in their comparative scale. Had the gallery's north wall not been limited by a row of large windows, I would have chosen to place these there – allowing for viewers to obtain a greater distance between themselves and the works. Walking in an anti-clockwise direction from the door, viewers encountered the serene quality of MacGarry's *La Tenda Rossa* (2004) (Figure 2) as a welcomed respite from the intense energy created by the fervent colours and challenging subject matter presented within the primary gallery space. This moment of calm was, however, promptly disrupted by the sound of shrieking children booming from the Barnett and Nesbitt's installation *Warcry* (2007) (Figures 21 & 22). For this installation, two video projectors were placed facing the opposite walls within the gallery's

alcove. The alcove allowed for the viewers to walk into a relatively contained space and feel sufficiently overwhelmed by the combination of sound and imagery played on a continuous loop on either side of them.

From a curatorial perspective, the simple and "low-fi" character of the overall installation was intended to allude to the everyday mode of the carnivalesque with which these artists engage. This carnivalesque needs no stage necessarily – it is "play without a stage" that is intended to ignore the boundaries between audience and "performer". Unlike the traditional medieval carnival, this engagement can be found independent of spatial and temporal constraints, and may be chosen as a form of expression by both individual artists and those working in collaboration.

Exhibiting particular artworks in a context such as a group show raises questions not only about their socio-political relevance, but also about their aesthetic dimension. Both MacGarry and Shibase, for instance, consider the way the media can be shown to turn politics into a spectacle as being of great interest. Together, Barnett and Nesbitt explore the question of how pleasure is gained in culture – why playful, spectacle-like or carnivalesque events or activities generate more pleasure or increase emotions, making them seductive and desirable. Mntambo's works, alternatively, consider the aesthetic side of the carnivalesque, or rather the carnivalisation of the aesthetic.

Although difficult to ascertain, by the fact that I was not present for the remaining duration of the exhibition, the show was generally speaking well received by its American audience. The majority of this positive feedback was gleaned from the gallery's visitor's book and the many conversations I had with visitors during the course of opening night. I paraphrase three of the more insightful comments made during these conversations below:

> It's refreshing to see micro-narratives from a highly politicised context where notions of identity, trauma and memorializing have a tendency to dominate, for understandable reasons. The work of this younger generation of artists while acknowledging place and context offers alternative, more idiosyncratic work and languages (Enid Schildkrout, Museum for African Art, New York Chief Curator, Director of Exhibitions and Publications, 2008).

> These kinds of curatorially focused group shows on contemporary South African art rarely make their way into the commercial gallery arena in New York. Rarely also are we offered the opportunity to personally engage with the artists and talk about their work (Lisa Binder, Museum for African Art, Assistant Curator, 2008).

> The grasp of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque in relation to the artists selected makes for an interesting approach, but its application to Mbembe's aesthetics of vulgarity touches on the slightly contrived and somewhat parochial (Svetlana Alpers, Art Historian).

3.3. Conclusion

While my research and resultant exhibition have both examined and presented works that problematise the construction of social and political identities, the primary focus has been on an in-depth, personal understanding of an identifiable carnival impulse within the temperament of contemporary South African art. Applying carnivalesque theory as a primary system of analysis, I have examined various works that offer a form of productive estrangement and progressive critique to the language of local contemporary production. Bakhtin's conception of a critical carnivalesque was employed along with Mbembe's dystopian vision of a postcolonial African grotesque, to unpack the complex and idiosyncratic works of emerging artists, Nandipha Mntambo, Michael MacGarry, Themba Shibase, Nina Barnett and Robyn Nesbitt.

Through both my theoretical and practical methods of engagement with various works by each of these artists, I have found it reductive to draw finite conclusions in an effort to merely evidence similar applications of the carnivalesque or common points of departure for probing the body politic. This has been a strategic move away from producing a body of research that functions as evidence for a specific case, choosing instead to annotate my informed observations. The thematic sectionalising of my research, inspired largely by Mbembe's criticisms of the postcolony, was intended to encourage an imprecise and reflective reading.

That said, there are a number of salient observations I have argued for throughout this paper – the focus on carnivalesque theory intends to provide an established, but open-ended, system for the analysis of creative works that address the subject of identity in Africa with a new liberated sense of detachment and satiric self-reflexivity. As an expression of social desire, the carnivalesque work of art can be considered socially influential with real subversive agency in that it performs a protective role that allows artists to create, at least temporarily, a "different" or externalised space for articulating new ideas such as enabling the revitalisation of the already established concept of identity. Violating the venerated subject of cultural identity in South Africa not only makes the perception of taboos possible but fosters reflexive social and political articulation. In this sense, taboos and violations of taboos serve as an interface between inside and outside, self-perception and the perception of others. They promote the building of community by drawing a boundary between the "self" and the "Other", and thus provide the artist with subversive ways to explore cultural identity. (Shedhalle exhibition, *Spectacle, Pleasure Principle or the Carnivalesque*, Zurich, 2004)

With few practicable substitutes for the carnival today, these moments of reflection or 'threshold' situations manifest only as isolated moments. It is these moments I hope to have sufficiently explored within the work of MacGarry, Mntambo, Shibase, Barnett and Nesbitt, where together with a tone of laughter, they express carnivalesque sensibilities in their individual interpretations of an African identity. Employing mechanisms of appropriation, expropriation or alienation to generate certain signs

and symbols, this carnivalesque may perhaps be understood as its own cultural practice through which the South African artist can freely articulate him/herself. It can therefore be said to offer emancipatory possibilities for the active production of meaning and the construction of cultural identity.

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4.2. Illustrations



1. Michael MacGarry, *Spiderman* (2005)



2. Michael MacGarry, *La Tenda Rossa* (2004)



3. Michael MacGarry, *The Classicist* from *African Archetypes* series (2007)



4. Michael MacGarry, *The Father (Reversal of Fortune)* from *African Archetypes series (*2007)



5. Michael MacGarry, *The Economy of Modernity* (2005)



6. Michael MacGarry, *Tipp-Ex Politics* (2008)



7. Michael MacGarry, *H.F. Verwoerd Tipp-Ex Politics series* (2008)



8. Michael MacGarry, *Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki* from *Champagne Socialists series* (2008)



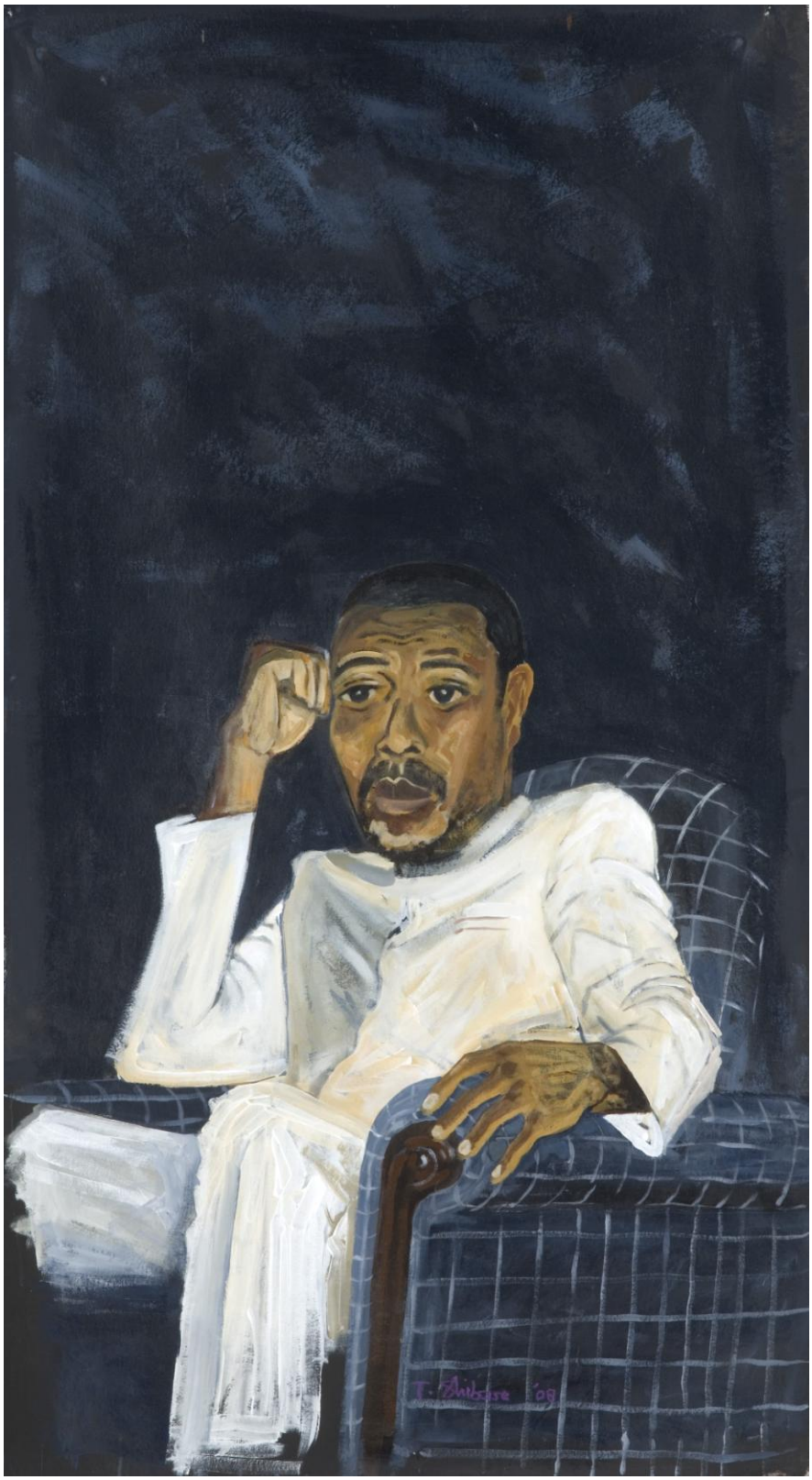
9. Michael MacGarry, *Zhou Enlai and the Scramble for Africa* (2008)



10. Michael MacGarry, *L'Étranger* (2008)

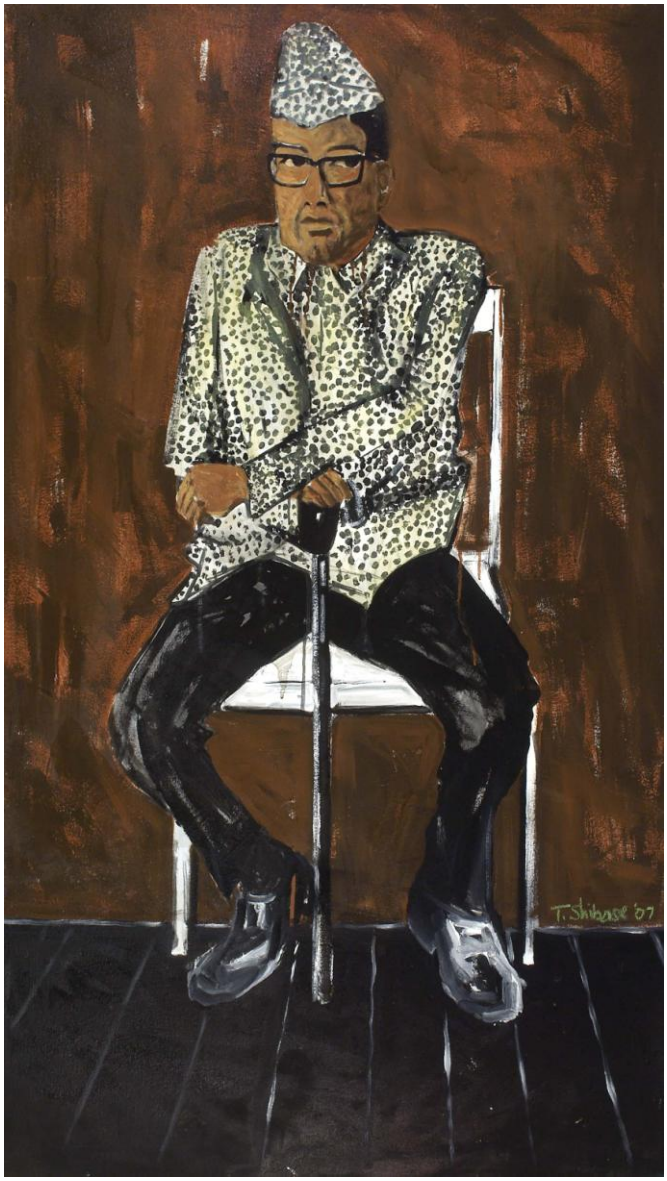


11. Themba Shibase, *Wena Wendlovu (Big Al)* (2008)



12. Themba Shibase, *Wena Wendlovu (Taylor the Dictator and Thief)* (2008)





13. Themba Shibase, *Wena Wendlovu (His Excellency 1)* (2007)
14. Themba Shibase, *Wena Wendlovu (His Excellency 2)* (2007)



15. Themba Shibase, *Economic Ascendance – A New Battle Ground* (2008)



16. Nandipha Mntambo, *Silent Embrace (1 & 2)* (2007)



17. Nandipha Mntambo, *Silent Embrace (1-11)* (2007)



18. Nandipha Mntambo, *Beginning of the Empire* (2007)



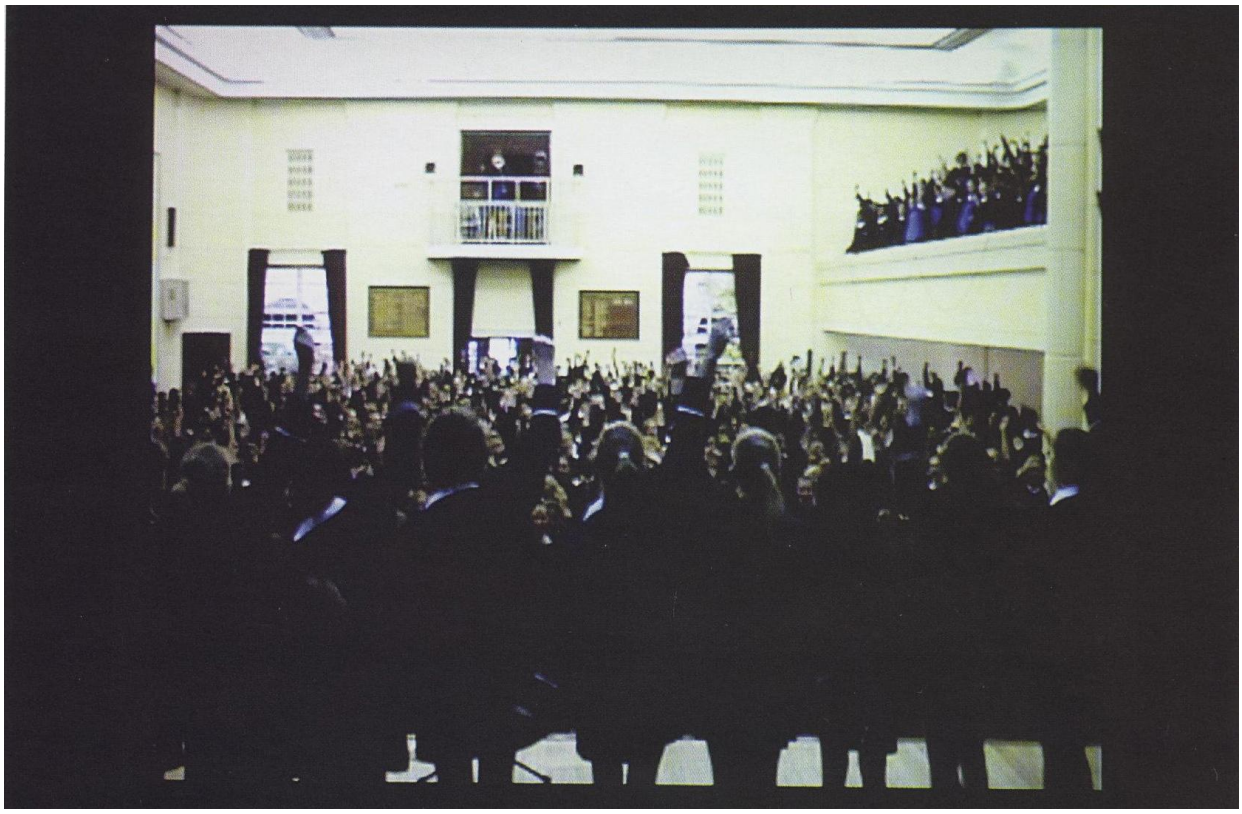
19. Nandipha Mntambo, *Indlovukati* (2007)



20. Nandipha Mntambo, *Europa* (2008)



21. Nina Barnett & Robyn Nesbitt, *Warcry (Boys)* (2007)



22. Nina Barnett & Robyn Nesbitt, *Warcry (Girls)* (2007)