

# Research Report

## Beginning with Criticism: An Analysis of the First Four Volumes of *Art South Africa*

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### Abstract:

*Art South Africa* is currently the leading, professionally published art magazine in South Africa. The magazine plays an important role in the dissemination of art discourse and art news and is the only ongoing, printed forum devoted exclusively to South African contemporary art. In this paper I will be looking at *Art South Africa* to describe the type of art texts it presents and the particular position it has taken in the contemporary art world of South Africa. In doing this I will be analysing the magazine to register the types of writing and other information in formats such as art news, exhibition reviews, artist bios, interviews and even advertising. This paper will also be analysing selected texts to determine the key issues that are represented and the way those issues have been represented with a critical position. Looking at *Art South Africa* from many angles will show that criticality is one of the magazine's ideological aims and though the magazine's format changes over time, it has continually sought to engage its readers in critical discourse.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Aim	1
1.2 Rationale	1
1.2.1 History and Texts	2
1.2.2 Why Art Criticism?	3
1.3 Scope	5
1.4 Key Terms	
<b>Chapter 2: Literature and Theory</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 The Necessity of Researching Art Writing	10
2.1.1 Why is <i>Art South Africa</i> important?	13
2.2 Understanding Art Critical Writing and Critical Theory	18
2.2.1 A Brief History of Criticism in the Western World	18
2.2.2 The Theoretical Framework	23
<b>Chapter 3: <i>Art South Africa</i>, Phase 1</b>	<b>32</b>
3.1 Analysing <i>Art South Africa</i>	32
3.2 Looking at Phase 1, Issues 1 and 2	34
3.2.1 Analysis of volume 1, issue 1	34
<i>The news section</i>	36
<i>The features section</i>	38
<i>The reviews section</i>	40
3.2.2 Analysis of volume 1, issue 2	41
<i>The editorial</i>	41
<i>The features section</i>	42
3.3 Criticality in <i>Art South Africa</i> , Phase 1	46
3.3.1 Example 1	
<i>Example 1 A</i>	48
<i>Example 1 B</i>	49
3.3.2 Example 2	51
3.3.3 Example 3	
<i>Example 3A</i>	53
<i>Example 3B</i>	55
<b>Chapter 4: <i>Art South Africa</i>, Phase 2</b>	<b>58</b>
4.1 Analysis of Phase 2	58
4.1.2 Analysis of Volume 3, Issue 4	59
<i>The editorial</i>	60
<i>Letters to the editor</i>	61
<i>The news section</i>	62

<i>The features section</i>	64
<i>The reviews section</i>	67
4.2 Theme Topics in Volume 4	68
4.2.1 Volume 4, Issue 1	68
4.2.2 Volume 4, Issue 2	71
4.3 Analysis and Discussion	73
Chapter 5: Conclusion	81
Acknowledgments	88
Appendix	89
Further Reading List	91
Bibliography	93

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Aim

First published in the spring of 2002, *Art South Africa* is a professionally published art magazine and it is the only ongoing, printed forum for art writing on South African contemporary art. This important and unique magazine is the subject of this research report. In this paper I will examine the first four volumes of *Art South Africa* and I will analyse the texts from those issues to determine the type of information it presents and the particular position it has taken in the contemporary art world of South Africa. Specifically, I will analyse critical texts presented in the journal to try to establish how the magazine has been positioned as a critical body of texts. In doing this I will be analysing the magazine to register the types of writing and how the authors handle critical issues in formats such as art news, exhibition reviews, artists' biographies and interviews. These analyses will give indications as to how the editors and other contributors to *Art South Africa* perceive its role as a source of criticism, which critical issues are seen as worthy of printing and the techniques it uses to effectively present critiques.

### Rationale

Having now established the basic aim of this project, I will explain why *Art South Africa* has been chosen as an important subject in the history of South African art. The first question I will address is why is art criticism important, and secondly, why is *Art South Africa* important?

*History and texts:*

To address the significance of art criticism I must first explain the importance of correlating the history of a society with the literature it produces. The act of writing sets

into motion a literary act as well as a social act<sup>1</sup> the literary act is a witness to the conditions of the time in which it was written. In the same way the text also shapes the readers. The evidence of this interaction between society and text, are the traces of “ideology”<sup>2</sup> or perhaps simply the/a “worldview” that the author always leaves imprinted on the text. So, in the practice of analysing literature (including art writing and criticism) the critic may, as in traditional criticism, view the text as a static composition, with fixed eternal meaning, as the traditional literary critics did<sup>3</sup>, or they may see the text as a localised, period-specific object, which, with careful study, can be understood as a historical artefact of a specific moment and place in which it was written.

Art criticism too contains traces of the author’s social position. Whether the traces that are shown through the authors choice of words, value judgements or any other kind of textual indicator are called ideology or simply opinions about art, art writing can reveal the social values of the author and, on a larger scale, popular values for the times.

In addition, the material conditions in which the texts are written also affect the nature of the text and give information about the social context for the publication. Financial factors have always shaped the goals of the texts, its limitations and the span of its readership. Everything from the price of the text to the number of copies distributed can give the historian or literary critic information on the nature of the text and the social context. For example, *Art South Africa* is severely limited in its ability to reach the entire

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Cros, *The Theory and Practice of Sociocriticism* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota, 1988) 5. Here Cros discussed the necessity of social act of reading a text. Only through the reading of the text does the text become part of society. The work of E. Cros will be discussed in detail in chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Cros used the term “ideological traces” to describe this characteristic. This too will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> There is no clear date for the end of traditional criticism or the beginning of criticism, which accounts for social “eras” which affect the meaning of the texts, but many of the most important theories of this type of criticism began in the latter half of the twentieth century. Theories such as New Historicism, postcolonial studies and feminist criticism all began roughly at the same time during the 1960s, 1970s and beyond. But, certainly these theories arose from Marxist roots.

population because the majority of the population, including people who are interested in the arts, is severely impoverished and will never purchase an art magazine.<sup>4</sup>

In both the analysis of the material conditions and the written content of the text there is a physical manifestation (perhaps in the quality of its printing) as well as a sociological imprint (perhaps in the language of the discourses it engages) of a particular historical moment. The goal of this research report is not to describe long-gone history but to describe a historical moment. That moment is the beginning of the art magazine *Art South Africa*. I will be concerned with analysing the content and the characteristics of this magazine to describe accurately what it represents; it is an attempt to understand the current situation so as to preserve an interpretation of what *Art South Africa* was doing and how it influenced the way art is positioned in South Africa.

### *Why Art Criticism?*

Remembering the discussion above, the purpose of discussing art writing and criticism is simply because it is a text, and like any other text it reveals significant discussions, material conditions, and social values which are characteristics of its historical context. Art criticism is also significant because it often deals expressly with these issues, unlike some other texts such as tax forms, instruction manuals for electronic devices, or maps, which all also contain sociological information, but do not discuss things such as race and power relations explicitly.

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<sup>4</sup> Art is an elite crowd anywhere, so perhaps poverty doesn't affect the magazine's readership because the majority of people wouldn't be reading the magazine anyway. But I like to think that if at least schools, public libraries and other institutions had more funding, they would carry the magazine and there would be a greater number of readers. Furthermore, poverty affects people who are interested in art as well as those who are not. Though the art crowd is usually middle or upper-class, I am sure that a large percentage of art students find *Art South Africa* too costly for purchase.

More particularly, I chose *Art South Africa*, because it is distributed nationwide and even in several other countries. *Art South Africa* has an advantage that local newspapers do not because it is sold nationwide by popular, franchise bookstores found in most of South Africa's sprawling malls, museums, airports, trendy cafes and bookstores. Though the art discourse constructed in conferences, public lectures and expensive books is also important, journalistic art writing is much more accessible, costs considerably less, and therefore has a greater hand in developing the nation's general feelings about art. The existence of a nationally distributed discussion on art cannot be underestimated. Michael Brenson, discussing journalistic criticism in America writes,

Given their influence not only on art but also on the perception of art by people in power, what does it mean when the publications that have the ability to set the agenda for journalistic criticism and reduce the art coverage and communicate little sense of mission in what they do cover? What is the effect on the field when the critics writing for these broad-based national publications, all of them with real strength, and some with impressive talent, seem to have almost no desire to engage the most pressing issues of their time.<sup>5</sup>

He continues later in the text writing, "Critics writing for these general publications have a special if not a unique, opportunity to respond to the immediacy of art and communicate the power images and objects have."<sup>6</sup> In South Africa as well, *Art South Africa* is arguably the best format for immediate issues in the art world. Unlike books, which can take years to write and publish, *Art South Africa* is published quarterly. Unlike newspapers, *Art South Africa* can provide lengthy articles and glossy colour images. A journal such as *Art South Africa* is indispensable if the art world in South Africa does intend to grow and develop.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Brenson, "Resisting the Dangerous Journey" in *The Crisis of Criticism*, ed., Maurice Berger (New York: New York Press, 1998) 105-106.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109.

To emphasise the importance of *Art South Africa* it must again be noted that there are very few art publications in South Africa and other African countries. Only an “e-zine,” *Art Throb*, discusses contemporary South African art in a format similar to *Art South Africa*, but because it is an online publication, it does not provide the same type of information and tends to be more news-oriented with shorter articles and reviews. Salah Hassan noted in the Spring/Summer of 2001 issue of *Nka*, in an editorial introduction to the issue, that there is an urgent need for forums to discuss art in Africa. He mentions art criticism and publications in particular as necessary places for discussion.<sup>7</sup> *Art South Africa* is a forum for African art printed *in Africa*. This is a vital factor because, though there are many journals on African art in Europe and North America, *Art South Africa* provides autonomy over the content that foreign publications do not.

Considering that *Art South Africa* is one-of-a-kind in many ways, and that it is selling a significant number of copies to interested individuals as well as libraries, galleries and museums, there is a clear indication of an interest in this type of writing. If this is so, then *Art South Africa* is a significant contributor to the discourse on art in South Africa, and in this way the magazine will be an important player in the history of art in the democratic South Africa.

### **Scope**

As mentioned earlier, *Art South Africa* has only been published since 2002, and only quarterly. There are sixteen issues from four volumes, printed at this time, though one additional issue, for Summer 2006, will appear in the very near future. My primary area of interest for this paper is in those sixteen issues, so the specific scope of my

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<sup>7</sup> Salah Hassan, Editor’s Introduction in *Nka*, (Spring/Summer, 2001)13. Note also that the magazine, ironically, is no longer published.



research will span from 2002-2006 (ending with issue 4 of volume 4). However, this report required a considerable amount of background reading which included a number of older art writing texts from the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> In addition, I have looked at many authors from North America and Europe for information on their local, as well as more international trends in art writing. Using these texts, I will be discussing the recent history of English language art writing and also the current state of art writing and theory in Europe and America in the second chapter of this paper.

In the following pages I will discuss some possible definitions for several of the most complex terms used in this paper, before moving to chapter 2, which contains the background and theoretical framework for this paper.

### **Key Words:**

*Art writing* is the general term I use to describe all kinds of formal writing about art. This can include critical texts, non-critical texts, reviews, poetical essays and art history. However, I will try to distinguish between the different types of art writing by naming them individually when necessary.

*Art review* is a kind of writing that is descriptive and non-critical. It is a review of exactly what the writer saw in the work, or exhibition. It does not contain judgements, or state positions on the work, but does interpret the work to a certain degree. There are many levels of interpretation; describing an obvious feature or commonly known interpretation does not require one to take a position, while, on another level, describing a feature and attaching an outrageously novel interpretation would require a position because the author is in contention with common knowledge. Still, the art review does

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<sup>8</sup> References for these texts can be found in the “Reading list” on page 90.

not attempt to argue for anything, prove anything, or defend anything related to the work's value.<sup>9</sup> However, it is my belief that any art review that contains a sustained description with approving words (for it is easy to see the critic's approval in the types of words they choose) at some point will express judgement. It is easy to write fifty words without passion, but it is more difficult to write a review of 2000 words without expressing your disapproval or appreciation for the work in some way. In fact, even the choice of subject is some kind of divulging of the critic's taste.

*Art criticism* is any text that takes a position in favour of or against something. In art criticism something about the work or related to it must be in question, which could perhaps be the quality of the work or the interpretations normally made, or any number of other things; the critiques must be made in regard to this contested feature of the work. The critical text could be in the form of an aesthetic criticism, formalist criticism, a study of the ideology of the work, or the effectiveness of the work's message. The good critic will explain how he or she arrived at these conclusions through her studied or unstudied response. Though it seems to me better that a critic be clear about what they intend to criticise, even texts that attempt to hide or obscure their opinions are still critical. In a traditional sense, however, the definition of art criticism would have been very different. For example, Donald Preziosi defines it this way: "closely allied to aspects of connoisseurship, art criticism normally entailed an ability to discern quality and skill in works, as defined by particular standards or canons of taste common to a time or place."<sup>10</sup> This certainly doesn't describe the art criticism of today, where canon and standardised

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<sup>9</sup> Theodore F. Wolff and George Geahigan, *Art Criticism and Education* (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois, 1997) 14.

<sup>10</sup> Donald Preziosi, Glossary in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1998), 578.

tastes no longer rule, though they are still palpably influential in what is chosen as “good” or “bad.”

*Discourse* is another term that I will use frequently in this paper. When I use this word I am referring to the system of language and “way of talking” about a certain subject. This means that each academic discipline, or school of philosophy, line of work, *et cetera* will have its own, one could say, “secret” language.<sup>11</sup> They will use specialised terms which determine the conditions of the subject and that may or may not correlate with the popularly known definition. Discourse, at least good discourse, implies the idea of social interaction (communication between people) and insiders and outsiders, since only those who have learned the special language will be equipped to engage in the discussion. For this paper it is important to note that discourse is a kind of construction, and developed discourse cannot occur without a space in which it can take place (such as a journal, conference or online chat room) and it requires effort over time to refine and improve the discourse. Also, it does not occur without the ability for participants to respond to each other, and debate ideas. When there is no public debate and dialogue a discourse becomes like someone who is arguing with him/herself in an empty, soundproof room, which does not easily lead to open and unbiased working out of the issues under consideration in the discourse.

*Ideology* is a term that is best known for its essentiality in Marxist theories. However, though the way I am using this term has roots in Marxism, I will use the term more generally. For the early Marxists ideology had “almost wholly negative

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Said discusses this kind of behaviour. See page 26 for discussion.

connotations as the delusions which others suffered about their own beliefs and values.”<sup>12</sup>

However in other contexts the term can have a more neutral meaning. In my definition it is a set of ideas about the arrangement of the world and the actors in it. These ideas about the way the world works determine what we believe and how we act. We are not necessarily aware of our ideologies, and we are not necessarily aware of their connection to reality. In fact, I would suggest that it is doubtful that they actually are connected to reality, since they are constructed from biased perspectives, and individual desires and needs. In a sense all ideologies are individual; our identities are all individual since each person belongs to an infinite and different set of groups that embed in us different social values. On the other hand, when we discuss ideologies we are usually referring to the commonalities between similar groups of people. For example, people from the working class may be concerned with issues like trade unions, minimum wage, and free education. Those from the wealthier classes may be concerned with long-term financial investment and tax law. Ideology also extends to morality and even religious beliefs. All of these things influence our particularised way of looking at the world, which determines our behaviour.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Brannigan, *Transitions: New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (New York: St. Martins, 1998), 14.

## Chapter 2: Literature and Theory

This chapter will give background information necessary for the analysis of writing in *Art South Africa*. I will discuss why art writing is an important topic for research, why it is necessary to analyse *Art South Africa* and why I have chosen to use criticality as the central topic of my analysis. In the following sections I will review some background literature which will outline important features of art criticism, its history and modern theories of art criticism. In addition, at several points I will discuss the theories of criticism and art that make up the theoretical framework in this research paper.

### The necessity of researching art writing

The purpose of looking at the history of art writing is tied to the relationship between texts and history, just as I explained in chapter 1 with regard to the social history of texts.<sup>1</sup> To understand the social history of art, one must also understand the social history of art writing. Since art writing often makes up the bulk of our material record of art and helps historians to understand how art works were positioned in their contemporary times and also, through analysis of the ideological traces in those texts, it helps up to understand broad sociological settings in which the art was made. According to one art critic, since art criticism is often the basis for our reception of a new work, “the history of art criticism is both the record of such relationships and the demonstration of their significance to the work of art.”<sup>2</sup> So, this study, though it will not be primarily a history of South African art writing, will be a record of what was happening in one important publication on South African art. Art historian Reinhold Janzen uses a German

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<sup>1</sup> See Edmund Cros, page 2 and following.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Kuspit, foreword to *Felix Fénéon and the Language of Art Criticism* (Ann Arbor: UMI P., 1980) xii.

term, characteristically concise and apt, *Rezeptiongeschichte* to describe “the history of critical response to art.”<sup>3</sup> If art is indeed a strong exposition of the sociology of a particular point in history, then the reception of those images at the time in which they were made is also valuable to future historians.

David Carrier quotes Arthur Danto in his book *Artwriting*: “An object is an artwork, Danto says, ‘only under interpretation’<sup>4</sup>” It is true that talking about an object as art, if it can be discussed as an artwork, determines whether or not it is valuable to consider as art. If it is not valuable to discuss the object as art, then it is not considered art, at least for that particular society at that particular time. Often, the subjects that are important in art discourse at a given time, are also important subjects in other realms of discourse such as politics or literature. In this way, discourse on art sometimes reflects the values and interests of the society *en masse*. Further, the texts that accompany art can often be as much a part of our experience of the work as visiting a museum, watching a film, attending an artist’s performance, or even working on our own art objects. It is important to record how art writing has affected personal responses as well as the community’s response to art. This is one of the factors that qualifies *Art South Africa* for an in depth analysis such as the one I will be undertaking.

My goal in studying *Art South Africa* is to examine art critical texts in the magazine. Criticality is vital for any democratic society as it partially enables discussion, debate, openness and self-reflexivity, by publicising issues that are related to both art and other sectors of society and by instilling a critical mindset that could be used in any field of discourse—political or literary, for example. Criticality in art writing, aside from its

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Kuspit quoting Reinhold Janzen, *Ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> David Carrier, quotation from Arthur Danto’s *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Cambridge U, 1981) 1-2.

use in the larger socio-political arena, also ensures that the art world is not given over to some kind of hegemonic institution or style. The right to be critical of the art world is essential to its openness and fairness. For this reason I think it is useful to study the position of critical texts in *Art South Africa* to determine how openness and criticality is achieved.

One of the most significant moments for art in the beginning of a democratic South Africa could be marked by the seminal speech “Preparing ourselves for freedom” written by Albie Sachs in 1989.<sup>5</sup> In this speech Sachs emphasises the need for a new conception of art in the free South Africa. He calls for an end to “solidarity criticism”; that is, after struggling for a democratic society, critics and artists must feel that they are free to explore and critique rather than affirm every part of culture in the name of “unity.” He also calls for a ban on the phrase “art as a tool for the struggle,” which was a motto commonly used to unite art and politics successfully during Apartheid times, but also threatened art’s ability to provide pleasure that is free from the burden of politics. Though this affirmative consolidation of art and culture was an effective tool against opponents in the Apartheid era, he suggests it is no longer necessary and will only impoverish the quality of art in South Africa. Sachs’s critique forewarns of the homogenization of culture that is possible in the Rainbow Nation. There were many different responses to Sachs’ speech. For some, particularly the academics who critiqued Sachs in the book written in response to the speech, *Spring is Rebellious*, it seemed quite natural and unarguable; in fact, for many involved in the art world Sachs’s edict was nothing new at all. For others, mainly the politicians, who were still pleased that art was tool for the

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<sup>5</sup> deKok, Ingrid and Karen Press, Eds. *Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about Cultural Freedom by Albie Sachs and Respondents* (Cape Town: Buchu Books, 1990).

struggle, it was quite contentious, which may be partly due to the very stratified world of the cultural workers. For example, the politicians present at the initial speech, given to representatives from the ANC in 1989 during a conference on arts and culture, may have had a very different response from that of the general public, who read the speech in a newspaper shortly after. The initial responses were quite complex and the polarity of viewpoints is well represented in the essays written for *Spring is Rebellious*<sup>6</sup>.

Though Sachs' speech may be considered clichéd or at least redundant in the present discourse about art, it certainly is remembered by many as a key moment in transforming the relationship between art and politics; and, it is particularly poignant for my discussion. The story of Sachs's speech illustrates just how contentious the issue of criticism can be in South Africa. Is it right to criticise fellow artists and cultural workers? Sachs was right about the dangers of solidarity criticism; the critical arena must make room for all opinions, even those that make the art elite squirm.

### **Why is *Art South Africa* important?**

Criticality and *Rezeptiongeschichte* may be very important topics for discussion and grounds for the study of art writing, but why choose *Art South Africa* over another publication? I chose *Art South Africa* because it really is the only choice, since it is the only sustained, academically accredited art magazine published in South Africa. There is a serious lack of regularly published journals on art in South Africa and *Art South Africa* is nearly the only publication that is filling the gap. There have been a few publications in the past, such as *Ventilator*, a project of Ivor Powell's, but it was discontinued after one issue. One can imagine why there are few publications, since resources are limited and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



the art crowd of the democratic era, in which equal access is obliged, is still new. Perhaps due to the sparseness of art texts in circulation, understanding the few publications that are available is even more important, since *Art South Africa* will pave the way for more art magazines that may (hopefully) be published soon.

It may be useful to look at a brief history of art publications of the last ten years so that we can place *Art South Africa* in a context. First, much of the recent history of South African art has been hinged on undoing the wrongs of the past government or examining the task of the new government. In this way many of the exhibitions, publications and burgeoning discourses have been centred on politics.<sup>7</sup> Many art publications are written for exhibitions such as Johannesburg's two biennales *Africus* and *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, held in 1995 and 1997 respectively.<sup>8</sup> Several major exhibitions were held in recognition of ten years of South African democracy and the catalogues for these exhibitions also provide rich resources for this study. In an account of art writing in South Africa Colin Richards writes "there is a rapidly developing body of catalogue essays... confined mainly to publications by major cultural institutions (metropolitan, provincial, and national art museums, foreign institutes, embassies, for examples and mainly business sponsored initiatives..."<sup>9</sup> Though this quotation represents an art world of ten years ago, it is still relatively accurate since even today the number of catalogues far outnumbers the number of monographs and journals.

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<sup>7</sup> *Art South Africa* continues in this tradition; the majority of articles deal with South Africa as a subject of discussion in some way.

<sup>8</sup> *Africus Johannesburg Biennale*. Johannesburg: Transnational Metropolitan Council, 1995. and *Trade Routes: History and Geography*. Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Colin Richards, "Peripheral vision: Speculations on art criticism in South Africa" in *Art Criticism and Africa*, Ed Katy Deepwell (London: Saffron Books, 1997), 84 note v. Note that though this text was written more than ten years ago, before the advent of *ArtThrob* and *Art South Africa*, which changed the terrain of art writing in South Africa, I believe this text gives an accurate account of the recent history of art writing.

Some South African newspapers contain art criticism or reviews that appear on a regular basis. Though many of these newspapers have a reputation for very good art criticism, many others are poorer sources of art criticism. *ArtThrob*, an online journal, has updated, or published, reviews and news each month since 1997. The website contains many reviews but most are short and non-critical, and often lack the quality that one would like to see in art writing. Although this has been a significant addition to dissemination of information on art in South Africa, it is not a good source for art criticism or discourse.

There are also a growing number of art monographs being published. Presently more publishers are investing in books on contemporary or past artists. David Krut Publishers has published a set of art monographs called the Taxi Series, which Sophie Perryer writes, “aim to extend the profile of South African artists while developing an educational archive,”<sup>10</sup> and thus represents a significant initiative in South African art writing. Occasionally, other books on South African art and art criticism are published; these include: *Art in South Africa: The Future Present*, by Sue Williamson and Ashraf Jamal in 1996;<sup>11</sup> *Grey Areas*, which contains essays debating the ethics of body images in art, was published in 1999;<sup>12</sup> and recently, in 2004 a substantial<sup>13</sup> reference book, *10*

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<sup>10</sup> Sophie Perryer, Ed, *10 Years, 100 Artists: art in a democratic South Africa* (Cape Town: Bell Roberts, 2004) 441.

<sup>11</sup> Williamson, Sue and Ashraf Jamal. *Art in South Africa: The Future Present* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Atkinson, Brenda and Candice Breitz, Eds, *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art* ( Johannesburg: Chalkham Hill, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> By substantial I do not mean that the texts contain intellectual substance but rather that the book contains a large amount of information and is physically big. It covers one hundred artists, each with a few pages of glossy photos and weighs in at about three kilograms.

*Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa*, was published by Bell-Roberts Publishers.<sup>14</sup>

This is only a short overview of the publications that have appeared on the art scene in the years since the end of Apartheid. What I hope to convey in this brief pictures is that there are very few predecessors for *Art South Africa*. The fact that *Art South Africa* has survived for so long in a hostile environment, one could argue, is proof that there is a supportive interest for a contemporary art magazine with space for art criticism and proof that its uniqueness is something worth considering.

On a slightly different note, *Art South Africa* is an important publication because it seems to have a particular interest in building a national identity for the arts by publishing on South African artists and events only. I do not wish to suggest that this is a sufficient reason for analysing the magazine, since I am arguing that its importance is due to its criticality and role in building art discourse, not nationalist discourse. However, it is worth noting that *Art South Africa* may also be important as it plays a large role in the task of nation building by raising public awareness about South African artists. If it weren't for *Art South Africa* the only journals available would be international journals like *ArtForum*. If this were the case there would be even less exposure for local artists than there is now. Additionally, the idea of a critical journal that discusses only South African art gives credence to the idea that what is happening here has critical import and is worth discussing. In fact, the reason that discourse is even possible (or in existence) in a South African publication is that South African people believe that they need a discourse that is specific to their nation.

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<sup>14</sup> Perryer, Sophie, ed. *10 Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa*

What I have attempted to explain above is the difficulty of the publishing economy in South Africa, but, even when one looks to more developed art economies, where journals and art associations have been well established for many decades there are similar problems in journalistic art criticism. The fact is, all over the western world, art critics are claiming that criticism is in crisis, though there seems to be no real consensus as to why.<sup>15</sup> Art magazines and journals have, at times, played a major role in the dissemination of art discourse. For those who are not involved in an educational institution, conferences or regular symposia on art, journalistic criticism is the only option for critical discourse on art. So, what happens if the criticism offered isn't any good? Perhaps the idealised role of the art critic as a revolutionary, making progress towards a critical society, exited when post-modernism entered; and though criticism is not as harsh and hard-hitting as it was during the time of Greenberg, a form of art criticism still exists and still flourishes. In fact, James Elkins notes that art criticism, though it is hardly taken as seriously as it was in the days of Clement Greenberg, it is more ubiquitous than ever before.<sup>16</sup> Still, art criticism doesn't contribute what it did in the days of Clement Greenberg.<sup>17</sup> Michael Brenson writes of contemporary art critics,

But with all the insularity of their language, and with all their sometimes alarming distance from, or indifference to the concrete living process of making and experiencing art, critical theorists and cultural critics are doing far better job considering the challenges of this time than [art criticism].<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In the pages below I will discuss Nancy Princenthal's article which is quite current and discusses the criticism in America. Other sources on the "crisis" include *The Crisis of Criticism*, Ed. Maurice Berger (New York: New York Press, 1998) which contains 10 essays written by prestigious literary and art critics such as bell hooks, Homi Bhabha, etc. Also James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Elkins makes this argument in chapter 1(p. 1-13) of his book *What Happened to Art Criticism?*

<sup>17</sup> Clement Greenburg, among many others, was one of the champions of rigorous academic criticism that dominated the art scene throughout the 1930-1960. I will discuss this in the following section in more detail. See Elkins, *What happened to art criticism?* Pages 69-77.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Brenson, "Resisting the Dangerous Journey: The Crisis of Journalistic Criticism," Ed. Maurice Berger *The Crisis of Criticism* (New York: New York Press, 1998), 103.

If art is really useful to society, and if critical discussion of art has particularised uses that fulfil social needs different from other types of criticism, then the crisis of criticism is alarming. How seriously do artists and writers take the discipline of criticism? Is it important? In the section below I will discuss theorists who do see criticality as a social value, a tool and an indication of a healthy society.

## **Understanding art critical writing and critical theory**

Now that I have described why *Art South Africa* is a useful topic for analysis I would like to look at some of the contextual information on the broader topic of art writing and art criticism. In this next section I will be discussing relevant points in the history of art criticism and in the following section I will be outlining some of the theoretical issues underlying ideas of criticism and discourse and also the type of analysis that I am using to examine *Art South Africa*.

### **A brief history of critical writing in the Western World**

Art criticism, or art writing, has only a relatively recent history. Though the origins of writing about the history, quality and meaning of art can be traced back to Aristotle and the sixteenth-century work of the first art critic,<sup>19</sup> Vasari, the history of art criticism that concerns me now began during the nineteenth century. Though this information may not seem directly relevant to the aims of this research it is useful for giving a perspective on how the current circumstances of art criticism have evolved from previous stages; it has not been a static practice during any epoch.

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<sup>19</sup> Many regard Vasari as the first art writer. He focused on contemporary artists, not the history of art. Joachim Winckelmann is also regarded as one of the first art writers, though his focus was art historical. See Donald Preziosi, Ed., "Art as history" in *The art of art history: A critical anthology* (Oxford: Oxford U., 1998) 21-23.

During the nineteenth century critics began to see that an artist's skill was not divine genius but something manufactured by the artist (and the critic). Not coincidentally, this revelation was concomitant with the nineteenth-century rise of capitalism and the first hints of the modern era and the end of academies and domineering royal patrons. Over time the discipline has diversified to include many types of art writing, such as bibliographic, poetic, anthropological and many others.<sup>20</sup> I am not including a substantial history of how these various types of art criticism came about.

The history of criticism that I am more concerned with for this record is the very contemporary criticism of the late twentieth century. Though there are innumerable factors contributing to the state of art criticism today, I would like to discuss only two: the expansion (in various directions) of the art world, and the acknowledgement of the power of critics to “make or break” artists' careers. First, fine art, “gallery” art that is sold as the original and authentic product of a single artist, has become increasingly popular in the last fifty years in nearly all parts of the globe. With the booming economy, the excess money and leisure time of the middle-class, patrons purchasing art works have become commonplace, which significantly increases the total number of works sold.<sup>21</sup> One historian writes that in the 1950s there were only about 250 people in the “art community” of Manhattan, and *Artnews* magazine reviewed every exhibition held in Manhattan.<sup>22</sup> Today, the magazine could hardly expect to review even a small portion of those exhibitions, let alone exhibitions countrywide. Today, art writers are aware that

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<sup>20</sup> Elkins' *What Happened to Art Criticism?* is primarily concerned with outlining these many types of criticism. Elkins names seven main types (e.g. “The philosopher's essay, conservative harangue, descriptive criticism), which he describes in the second chapter of the book. Another source which I mentioned earlier is Wolff's *Art criticism and Education*.

<sup>21</sup> The commoditisation of fine art has a long history and this type of “boom” in which there is a significant increase in the number of works in circulation and a growth in the middle-class purchasing can be seen at many points in history. (e.g. Northern Renaissance, particularly amongst the mercantile class)

<sup>22</sup> Nancy Princenthal, “Art Criticism Bound to Fail” *Art in America* (v. 94 no. 1, January, 2006) 46.

choosing what to write about is as much of a criticism, judgement of taste or value, as any written commentary about what the critic liked or disliked.<sup>23</sup> The other way the expanded world of art has influenced art criticism is that the art critical community has expanded in numbers just to keep up with the demand for art criticism. There are thousands and thousands of art critics, very few of them, however, are formally trained, or know much about art theory and history.<sup>24</sup> Some are art critics who work in popular media and write for a novice crowd, and others are art historians and philosophers who give a very different and more rigorous analysis of works. You can imagine how deeply this divides the discipline. While some critics are passionately advancing a standard and rulebook for art criticism, other critics could not care less about a standardised system for criticism.

The second reason for the current state of criticism is a new conscientiousness about the power of the critic to shape art and art history. One explanation for this is due to the extremely judgmental and often negative criticism that characterised the art world of about 50 to 70 years ago. Art criticism of the mid-twentieth-century was very different. Elkins names several ways in which one can see the clear differences. Clement Greenberg was probably the most famous critic who realised and took advantage of this power. He saw himself as an artist's most valuable ally and did his best to popularise his artist friends and denigrate his artist enemies. Note that when Clement Greenberg died he had procured many millions of dollars in artworks, mostly as gifts from young artists.<sup>25</sup> And though Greenberg was the chief of this tribe of art critics, he was not the only critic

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Elkins discusses this throughout chapter 1 and 2 of *What Happened to Art Criticism?*

<sup>25</sup> For a description his vast collection see Karen Wilkin "Clement Greenberg: a critical eye" in *Clement Greenberg: A Critic's Collection*. Princeton: Princeton U. P. 2001

who wrote with passionate opinion; through the entire early to mid-1900s art critics were “fiercely opinionated and polemic.”<sup>26</sup> And if it is true that what is written about in art criticism today will be the art history, and masterpieces, of the next generation, Greenberg would have an immense impact on what is regarded as part of the historical record of the twentieth-century.<sup>27</sup> Today, critics are sometimes reserved in their judgements, lest they be accused of abusing the power. While there are still plenty of opinions in art criticism, they are not as “ambitious” and rarely as judgemental and fierce as seen mid-twentieth-century.<sup>28</sup>

In a recently published article, Nancy Princenthal described the general disarray of the art critical discipline. These insights apply to art criticism in South Africa. Princenthal had several observations that may shed light on the direction that this paper will now take. The essay in *Art in America* from the January 2006 issue is titled “Art Criticism, Bound to Fail.” Princenthal has several insights about the state of art criticism worldwide and the origin of these problems. First, let me note that Princenthal’s definition of art criticism is similar to my own.<sup>29</sup> In her essay, she suggests that there are many types of art criticism, and many that are not directly “critical” or opinionated, and that there is a universal standard of non-standardisation in all types of criticism.

Discussing the state of art criticism in America, she argues,

The object of only fitful attention, sometimes warm but mostly exasperated, art criticism is an orphan practice, and has grown up without consistent discipline of any kind. This lack of order, rules of conduct and fixed standards for measuring success have lately, again (there is a

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<sup>26</sup> Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* 11.

<sup>27</sup> Kuspit in *Felix Fénéon*, xi-xii.

<sup>28</sup> Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* 12.

<sup>29</sup> Refer to key terms section, pages 8-9.



periodicity to this), provoked some despair; the term “crisis” has been used.<sup>30</sup>

Princenthal’s essay is certainly not dedicated to suggesting rules or changes that must be made to the discipline. In fact, she writes, in the same paragraph as the above quotation, “And if art is valued for exercising such spirited independence, why not the writing that addresses it?”<sup>31</sup> The bulk of the essay describes and explains the many ways suggested way to “improve” art criticism, or complaints about contemporary problems; most of this comes from direct comments from critics, and particularly their personal beliefs on how criticism *should* be. Some critics, she explains, complain about the lack of judgements (Princenthal also mentions that this is probably the most common criticism). On the other hand, some critics comment that, with so many art shows to review, just choosing one over the other is an approval and judgement enough. Others say that their personal opinion doesn’t matter.<sup>32</sup> James Elkins names seven different types of descriptive criticism, which are inherently non-critical, and also claims that this is one of the most common types of art writing.<sup>33</sup> For whatever reason, critics believe that description, without criticism, is the most important thing a critic can provide, according to a Columbia University survey of what art critics think about writing criticism.<sup>34</sup>

The point of this discussion is that there are many types of art writing and criticism; one is not better than all the others and all have their good and bad points. Princenthal refers to Peter Plagens’s descriptions of different types of critics in a quote I especially like. These are: evangelists, cartographers and goalies. The first are

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<sup>30</sup> Princenthal, “Art Criticism Bound to Fail,” 43.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Elkins, *What happened to art criticism?*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Elkins also describes the 2002 Columbia survey in detail on page 12.

proselytizers who write only to eagerly promote their favourite work, the second are dedicated to describing the lay of the land, the third are critics who say to themselves “It’s going to have to be pretty good to get by me.”<sup>35</sup> Princenthal suggests that no text is written according to just one style. Most critics are goalies one day, then evangelists the next. But, she does make one distinction that is equivalent to many of the arguments I have made. She writes, “In critical writing, clarity is, I think, close to an ethical imperative: it enfranchises readers. The possibility of engaging public attention and the responsibilities thus entailed are forfeited by writing that is deliberately obscure.”<sup>36</sup> This is the fundamental principle of art writing and criticism: it must clarify in hope of making something new available to the reader; the goal is to help readers to understand and appreciate art in a better way. From Princenthal’s text we can see how several of the features of contemporary art criticism in her study, mostly texts published in the United States, could also apply to what one may find in South Africa. Princenthal’s descriptions of these characteristics are a starting point for identifying features of South African art writing.

### **The Theoretical Framework**

In the following section I will present a theoretical perspective on the kinds of characteristics that are found in art writing texts. My goal is to explain theories of art criticism that are relevant to my research. Most importantly I will define what criticism and discourse are so that I can identify features of criticism that appear in *Art South Africa*. I am not able to give a holistic view of the art and critical theories of any of the named critics because of limited space, so I will be extracting the significant areas of

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<sup>35</sup> Princenthal, p. 45, quoting Peter Plagens from Amy Newman, “Challenging Art: *Art Forum*” (New York: Soho Press, 2000) 137.

<sup>36</sup> Princenthal, “Art Criticism Bound to Fail,” 45.

their work. Many of these discussion points are relevant to the kind of analysis that I am performing on *Art South Africa*. In a way, the kind of analysis that I will do in the following chapters, when I examine texts from the magazine, is also a kind of textual criticism. I will point out ways in which the theories discussed apply to both my research and that of the authors in *Art South Africa* whenever necessary.

I would like to begin this discussion with a very simple statement about what good criticism seeks to do. Terry Eagleton, one critic that will be discussed here, suggested that art criticism should “*explain* the text more fully.”<sup>37</sup> This means that it doesn’t just describe, but explains through analysis, and that criticism aims to improve the basic understanding by giving *more*. This is a very simple position and it forms the basis of the principles for understanding the character of art criticism as well all types of criticism.

Art criticism, like many other types of criticism, has a function in society. Art reviews (that is, non-critical writing as it was defined in chapter 1) has another function in society, but shares the same general purposes that art criticism serves. It does lack, however, the aim to destabilise its object (and subject), a function that I will discuss further in the next paragraphs. The purpose of critical theory is to study what that function is and also to suggest how that functioning can be improved. This research seems to be best complimented by a framework<sup>38</sup> of Marxist Criticism, which will be the focus of this paper, but will not exclude relevant points from any other frameworks. Terry Eagleton’s texts *Literary Criticism: An Introduction, Criticism and Ideology, Marxism*

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<sup>37</sup> Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> When I say “framework,” I mean to imply that this is not a tight adherence to Marxist critical theory.

*and Literary Criticism*<sup>39</sup>, and *Ideology and The Ideology of the Aesthetic*<sup>40</sup> are the primary texts that I will use to explain the fundamental purpose of art writing.

Terry Eagleton uses Jürgen Habermas' theory of discourse and community and Marxist theory to explain the distinct and necessary position of art criticism in society. He quotes Habermas in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*: “for Habermas, the good life shadows every discursive gesture.”<sup>41</sup> The good life, a term very familiar in Marxist theory, is not only concerned with the material conditions, the bourgeois and the proletariat, but also how art and literature and all human things influence the achievement of the utopian society.

The essential part of speech community Habermas presents is that in the community a free, open, dialectical discourse takes place. This is a community that empowers all members and works constantly to expand itself and the take the discourse in new, useful directions. Terry Eagleton explains,

As Habermas and Marxism recognize, in creating the material conditions in which a communication about these matters as free as possible from domination could be established, so that individuals, given full participatory access to the processes by which common meanings and values are formulated, could then select and exercise a plurality of values and styles in ways not currently available to them.<sup>42</sup>

Criticism of art, like any other discourse, is most effective when it is accessible, so that all people have equal opportunities to engage in the society. For Marxist criticism, art is “part of a society's ideology—an element in that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over another is either

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<sup>39</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methaen and Co., 1976).

<sup>40</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

seen by most members of society or not seen at all.”<sup>43</sup> The value of art is that it allows us to criticise the ideology hidden in traces, or in overtly socio-political content. The discourse around art and aesthetics is no less important in the development of utopian society as a discussion around labour and equity. In other cases it is art itself that is laden with foolish ideologies, in the eyes of the Marxist critics.

In Foucaultian theory, discourse analysis is used to penetrate the concealing veil created by the language surrounding certain topics. Discourse always yields power for those who manufacture the insider’s language. It can be used to conceal the truth and acts as a barrier for all trying to access the ideas within the discourse, but at the same time discourse can help to dismantle the barrier if it becomes or is reclaimed by an open and accessible discourse community. The goal of Marxist criticism is to counteract such improper uses of discourse to reinsert outsiders into the discussion. In this philosophy, discourse is not used as a code, but only a group of terms and ideas that surround a topic. This language is understandable and expressive, not suppressive. The openness is not achieved by dumbing-down the discourse or simplifying the language; it is achieved by explaining the complexities of the terminology and concepts so that all people can have access to the ideas. Edward Said writes usefully on this subject in “The Politics of Interpretation”<sup>44</sup> where he explains how various disciplines in the humanities, one of which is literary criticism, have become excessively exclusive and have tried to exclude other disciplines from entering their discourse through the use of specialised terms and narrowly defined kind of research. Again, Said points out that this is to maintain or

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<sup>43</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Edward Said, “The Politics of Interpretation” *Critical Inquiry* (v. 9, no. 1) was the first published in 1982 but in this paper I have used the excerpt printed in *Art in Theory*, Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, rpt. 1993), 1086-88.

“conceal the hierarchy of power.”<sup>45</sup> This represents a bad discourse, but Said suggests if borders are crossed between disciplines such as literature and journalism, the collaboration could turn closed (bad) discourses to open and healthy ones.<sup>46</sup> Though Said is writing with regard to rival disciplines, the same could be applied to schools of thought within one discipline. When there is a greater diversity of opinions in the discourse, it is robust and more likely to produce accurate interpretations. But, when an art critic refuses to interpret art in a way that gives access to the outsiders, he is doing so to retain his authority as the “*arbiter de novarum rerum*” and so he becomes a “snob.”<sup>47</sup>

Criticism is not merely a visual analysis or description, or a textual analysis in the case of literary criticism, but an analysis that reveals both the social context in which the text was produced and the history that informed the author/artists.<sup>48</sup> Terry Eagleton discusses these two elements, explaining that a full analysis must contain a sociology of the work, which includes its historical context, as well as an understanding of how present history affects a modern interpretation. A sociology of an artwork is often the focus of many art critical texts, but this conceals how the art critic’s interpretation of that sociology is affected by his or her own context. A Marxist critic, calling to mind Hegelian and Foucaultian models of history, must always be aware of the impact of history on the critic’s way of thinking. This is the importance of reflexivity in art criticism. Looking critically at the past, the critics should evaluate their truth claims checking for falsehoods that history has deposited into their worldview.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 1087.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1086-88.

<sup>47</sup> Kuspit, “Art Criticism: Where’s the depth” *The Critic is Artist: The Intentionality of Art* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press) 106.

<sup>48</sup> Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 3.

Consequently, the art critic can be an art historian, who reclaims the work for a contemporary reading of its meaning. A good critic is someone with an understanding of forms and meaning in historical context but it requires a consciousness about the culture in which he or she lives as well. Eagleton eloquently extends this concept; he suggests, “to write well is more than a matter of style; it is also having at one’s disposal an ideological perspective which can penetrate the realities of men’s experiences in a certain situation.”<sup>49</sup> This task requires a connection with contemporary social needs, not only knowledge of art history.

Another important aspect of art writing, which is particularly worth thinking about in relation to the type of analysis that I will perform in my evaluation of the *Art South Africa*’s texts is how language plays a role in the positioning of a text. One of the major tasks of my research will be to determine which texts are critical and which are non-critical and only descriptive, and also to determine what exactly the authors are critical about; a close reading with an interpretation of the language will be necessary to accomplish this. Understanding the techniques authors use to position their texts is a form of analysis necessary to the critical assessment of their writing.

In the book *Competing Discourse*,<sup>50</sup> author David Lee discusses how language can change the mood of a discourse. Even without directly saying “good” or “bad” an impression of the author’s opinion can be felt in the text through word and subject choice and the use of negative or positive connoted words. The words “simplistic” and “popular” used in an art context are negative criticism of the work, since “simple” art and “popular” art are traditionally thought to be less significant, i.e. “bad” works of art. Determining

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>50</sup> Lee, David. *Competing Discourse: Perspective and Ideology in Language*. (New York: Longman. 1992). The discussion referenced in this paragraph takes place on page 189.

whether a text is critical or not does not depend on the author's stated goals alone, but on the direct or indirect critical statements that are either conscious or unconscious attempts to defend a position.

I have not argued that art writing must always be critical, but what happens when critics *never* take a position on a subject or never make an evaluation of quality, or argue for a correct interpretation? Some critics fear making judgements because they do not wish to make enemies, others can be drawn into a transcendent philosophy of art that promotes the myth of art to a point where they are no longer able to criticise the work. In either case, the critics return to a dangerous tradition of criticism that believes the artist is a divinely inspired genius. When a critic "believes" in art or the artist and its mythical aesthetic without also questioning its value, the critic dumbly gives into art's authority, granting it fixed meaning and authority. Immediately the critic makes art a despotic belief system, which annuls criticism's important social uses.

Another aspect of this point is found in Janet Wolff's *The Social Production of Art*. She writes, "Art is always 'manufacture.' The mystification involved in setting artistic work apart as something different and usually superior to all other forms of work can be combated by showing that all forms of work are potentially creative in the same way..."<sup>51</sup> In criticism that "explains fully" and attempts to give justification for the critic's response

The hidden meanings of art are laid bare, and the particular interests of specific groups which are implicitly served by those meanings becomes clear. This is in no way to devalue the works as masterpieces of painting, sculpture or writing (or at least not in the majority of studies) but

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<sup>51</sup> Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1981) 13.



it is to point out what other, extra-aesthetic elements intrude into what purport to be purely aesthetic judgements.<sup>52</sup>

That is, art interpretation is meant to be an exercise in finding better, more accurate, more useful meanings that have arisen after the critic has carefully considered his or her response to the artwork.

Wolff's theory of sociology and art is useful in my research in another way, because, like Eagleton's writings, it provides an emphasis on social politics and material conditions that play a crucial role in the manufacturing of art in South Africa. In any place art's stimulation comes from an assembly of institutional influence and material constraints, as well as cultural values, moral and aesthetic. Here in South Africa, strained relationships between population groups and a traumatic history make some of these issues even more prominent. For this reason, examining art writing in terms of these issues is appropriate for my research project.

Janet Wolff's book, *The Social Production of Art* seeks to clarify the necessity of looking at the sociology of the art world. Taking a position slightly different from Terry Eagleton's, she explains that art is fundamentally the same as any other product produced by societies;<sup>53</sup> it too is produced from the same ideologies and modes of production; culture enables and constrains art in the same way as any other type of manufacture. This means that the traditional view of art production, where the artist is a specially gifted genius and works of art are divinely inspired, is a deeply out of synchronisation with the truth.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> This argument is first explained in Chapter 1 of Janet Wolff's *The Social Production of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

Wolff emphasises how various aspects of society make certain trends possible, open, to be chosen by artists. Art is always periodised and its form and content varies according to the time and place of its production. Creativity and aesthetics are also social constructs, which do not arise without prompting from something outside of the artists mind. Wolff writes “The existence of structures and institutions enables people to act,”<sup>54</sup> and this includes artist acts.

Though Wolff is writing about artistic productions in terms of fine arts and literature, the same applies to art writing, for it is also a literary genre and in many ways attempts to accomplish the same things as fine arts. The nature of art is to provide symbolic and meaningful renderings of life or the imaginary, sometimes for the purpose of escapism and other times for activism; art has endless sources of inspiration, but those impulses are the same for any kind of production, including art writing. Often, we find that artists and critics have similar ideologies, based on what kinds of values are available to them in their culture.

Wolff suggests that the place of art writing is to expose the ideologies that produced the art, which gives us a better understanding and appreciation of the works.<sup>55</sup> By extrapolating, the history of art criticism and its place in *Art South Africa* helps us to examine why criticism was considered valuable to the makers of the magazine and to the people who continued to buy it. In other words, what do the critics and their readers believe to be the goal of criticism? And, what important issues did those critics find most worthy of exploring in their texts?

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 143.

### **Chapter 3: *Art South Africa*, Phase 1**

In this chapter I will analyse the first eight issues of *Art South Africa*. But first, it may be useful to describe some of the basic features of the magazine. *Art South Africa* is a magazine of about 75 pages in volumes 1 and 2, but 96 pages in recent volumes. It is published quarterly from Cape Town, in collaboration with Bell-Roberts publishers. The magazine was first published in the spring of 2002 and at this point there are sixteen issues, and the seventeenth issue is due in stores soon. The magazine contains three major sections—the news, the features, and the reviews, each of similar length. The website for *Art South Africa* at artsouthafrica.com states that each issue contains no more than 30% advertising, which is, nevertheless, a major source of funding along with sales and subscriptions. The website also states that the magazine is sold at major books stores such as Exclusive Books, CNA and museums and galleries nationwide, which means that it can be found in most malls (which is no small number) in South Africa. *Art South Africa* is thus a widely distributed magazine and contains a large number of texts and is so frequently published that it could be considered the most substantial source of contemporary art writing in South Africa.

#### **Analysing Art South Africa**

Yet, *Art South Africa* is more than just a 96-page magazine with advertisements and beautiful colour images. *Art South Africa* is also one of the more well-known and widespread forums for art discourse in South Africa. It provides space for critics to discuss art works and issues and also respond to each other in a form of “public”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Art South Africa* is not a public discourse in the sense that it is for what is known as the general public, since the art world and readers of *Art South Africa* are really a small and select group. However, it is public

discourse. It also provides a body of critical texts on various subjects spanning from the importance of photojournalism to critiques of art competitions.

However, the achievement of a good critical discourse took place gradually, and is still an ongoing process. As we shall see in the first issues of *Art South Africa*, the task of creating a magazine that deals critically with issues is set out. The way in which the editors do this begins weakly, but improves throughout the four volumes analysed in my research. In this chapter I will look at the efforts made in the first phase of *Art South Africa*, volumes 1 and 2. In chapter 4 I will look at changes made by Sean O'Toole, as the new editor, in volumes 3 and 4, which I will call phase 2.<sup>2</sup> Specifically I will look at how O'Toole moves the magazine from being only a depository for critical texts to a forum for dialogue and multiple perspectives where discourse can be constructed.

My primary focus will be on the critical texts and aspects of the magazine's format that enhance or detract from the criticality of the texts. These are the major tasks for my analysis of *Art South Africa*: 1) I will show that *Art South Africa* does uphold criticality as an aspect of its mission. 2) I will look at how the editors include criticality and critical discourses through their selection of what they believe are appropriate texts for each issue and the kinds of features that appear in the magazine. 3) As I discussed in the introduction to this paper, one of the most important tools for artists and art writers is not only a space for art writing, but also a space for debate (critical discourse) about art. In fact, critical discourse is not only useful for the art world, but for all aspects of a

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in the sense that it is open, not restricted to particular people, though *de facto*, its "public" is a limited representation of the South African population.

<sup>2</sup> I'll be referring to volumes 1 and 2 as Phase 1 and volumes 3 and 4 as Phase 2. This division, which is really a division between the two editors, will facilitate the organisation of my analysis, as there are major differences (format and editorial) between the issues under Perryer and those under O'Toole.

democratic society. The most significant feature of *Art South Africa* is that it is one of the few spaces for dialogue, but this only occurs from Volume 3 onwards. In the third task of my analysis I will be showing how *Art South Africa* becomes a forum for critical discourse and how O'Toole makes changes that improve the critical discourse. I will also analyse the features that make it this type of forum and demonstrate how they work to create an effective space for debate.

### **Looking at Phase 1: Volumes 1 and 2**

In the following section I will be describing and analysing two issues from phase 1. I will be examining the features such as how much space is devoted to each author, or each type of writing (descriptive or critical) and what major issues are presented in the text. In addition, because we are looking at some key differences between issues under Perryer's editing and those under O'Toole, I will be pointing out characteristics that will change, or are changing throughout the issues. I have chosen to analyse the first two issues of *Art South Africa* as the examples for a concentrated interrogation because, in them, some of the primary goals of the phase 1 issues are sketched out. The second part of my analysis will consist of several examples of critical texts found in the first phase of *Art South Africa*.

#### **Analysis of Volume 1, Issue 1**

This is the inaugural issue of *Art South Africa*. Given the failure rate of the art magazines predecessors, one can imagine why even the editor of the magazine has reserved expectations for its success, though this journal does have major support from a reputable publisher and advertisers who were brave enough to invest in the magazine. In the editorial, Sophie Perryer discusses the dilemma of art publications in South Africa.

She is well aware of the difficulties and poor track record of other magazines and she describes them in the editorial. However, she mentions that there is a real need for this type of magazine, which provides “intelligent, critical writing” and “high quality, full colour images”<sup>3</sup> This gap, she implies, will be filled by *Art South Africa*.

Overall, the editorial acknowledges an appropriate amount of humility and begins the project with a realistic perspective on the chances for success. “Is it viable?” she asks at one point in the editorial. Maybe, but “there is no simple answer: just a desire to see something rather than nothing taking place.”<sup>4</sup> At no point in these few paragraphs does she ever show too much optimism about the magazine; she never mentions any grand plans or boasts about plans to out-last other magazines. Still, Perryer shows some optimism in a brief paragraph describing the articles where she writes that the quality of the texts “make it abundantly clear why it is worth attempting.”

The publisher’s note, on the other hand, is significantly more optimistic about the chances of sustaining *Art South Africa*. The authors Brenden and Suzette Bell-Roberts of Bell-Roberts Publishing mention that they will have money to promote and sustain the magazine and also that there is great interest from advertisers who will help sustain finances for *Art South Africa*.<sup>5</sup> The combination of confidence and humility between the publisher’s note and the editorial set a stage for the first issue of *Art South Africa* that is sensitive to the history of art publications, but with faith enough in the need for such a publication that they are willing to finance such a risky project.

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<sup>3</sup> Sophie Perryer in Editorial to *Art South Africa* (Spring 2002, v. 1 no. 1) 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

*The news section:*

The articles begin with the news section. I will examine two of the texts that have been written by two of the more frequent writers for *Art South Africa*. One of the two is on recent art competitions, by Kathryn Smith and the other, by Sean O’Toole, is on the Ars Electronica Festival. These two essays represent the two most common types of texts in the news section of *Art South Africa*. The first type as represented by Sean O’Toole, is purely descriptive, and combines quotes, statistical information and news into the text. Usually these describe an upcoming show or new gallery, or event. In this case O’Toole’s text is very short (fewer than 500 words) and provides only a minimal amount of information. He describes the basis for the festival and the artists involved, including the South African artists who will participate. There is no contextual information and no critical slant. It is purely a description of the news/current events. Of course, in a text that is only 500 words long, little else can be discussed.

The second most common type of text in the news section is one of those that takes a critical perspective on a current event and outlines its pros or cons. Texts of this sort are not, in format, much different from an article discussing politics and social policies, though main characters such as presidents and deputy ministers are replaced by artists and curators. In the text titled “Weighing up the competitions”<sup>6</sup>, which appears last in the news section and is at least three times longer than each of the other texts, Kathryn Smith describes the current position of art competitions. The overall tone is quite critical due to the fact that she makes several different judgements about the competitions. In the first section of the texts she defends the idea of art competitions but then goes on to criticise the way many of the recent competitions have been carried out.

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<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Smith, “Weighing up the competitions” *Art South Africa* (Spring 2002, v. 1 no. 1) 9-12.

The problem she poses is that there are a growing number of disappointing competitions. The decreasing quality of the work that artists have contributed over the last few years is the main contributor to this, according to Smith. She writes that,

Although the ‘closed’ prizes proved their worth this year, the standard of entries in the ‘open’ events was appallingly low. It is obvious that the latter events are not being taken very seriously, with most artists seeing them as a source of short-term funding...<sup>7</sup>

Smith has criticisms for each for low quality work and, in one of the closing paragraphs, she criticises the awards curators for allowing such poorly executed “free-for-alls.” She writes in the final paragraph,

[Competitions] can become the barometers they are so eager to be, as they allow for a broad spectrum of work one wouldn’t expect to see on a curated exhibition. But they must be marketed and juried professionally and effectively, deciding on mandates, and remaining dedicated to fulfilling them.<sup>8</sup>

I have only described two of the six texts from the news section. Most texts found in this section fall under the first type, which was represented by Sean O’Toole. However, the amount of “criticality” seems to be related to the length of the text. If, like O’Toole, a writer only has a few hundred words to write, a critical judgement cannot be upheld by detailed arguments and evidence, and without that support there is little reason for mentioning one’s opinion. Many texts in this first section, if they are long enough, will contain some statement about pros and cons, in the opinion of the writer, but they do not take a critical position throughout the entire article. Texts in which the main aim is to defend a contentious position, such as Kathryn Smith’s, are uncommon.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 12.



*The features section:*

The features section of this first issue contains five texts.<sup>9</sup> All of them are primarily descriptive and non-critical, but a few give their opinions and outline personal tastes. I will analyse only one of the texts in depth, but will briefly outline the others here. Hazel Friedman gives her interpretations of Brett Murray's recent work in "Exploding Heads" (pages 22-27). The text does not take a critical position but is contextualised by explanations of the concepts that Murray deals with in his work and describes his recent works and methods. Virginia MacKenny discusses the Documenta 11 exhibition in a text titled "Global Warming" in which she discusses the successes and failures of the exhibition in an approach that falls under the descriptive art writing category, but expresses some opinions. Bruce Haines discusses the work of Johannes Phokela in a text that interprets the work and examines the dichotomies of West versus Africa in his work. The last text in the features section is written by Suzy Bell. It describes David West, a fashion designer, and his line of clothing, plans for the future and philosophy on design.

The text I will discuss in detail is by Alex Dodd and is titled "Reinventing Jozi." The text is only about 1,500 words in length, but contains a number of large colour photographs and spans seven pages (remember that the Smith piece I just examined was nearly as long but took up less than three pages). The numerous and large colour photographs (taken by artist Wim Botha) add to the sensationalism of the story which relates the big plans for art in the Johannesburg downtown business district and Newtown. The brightly coloured and glossy photographs reveal how artworks have been integrated into the urban scene—traditionally styled wooden carvings top concrete

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<sup>9</sup> These are Alex Dodd, "Reinventing Jozi" on page 14; Hazel Friedman, "Exploding Heads", page 22; Virginia MacKenny, "Global Warming, page 28; Bruce Haines, " A Tale of Two Continents", page 34; Suzy Bell, "Westworld", page 40. These appear in volume 1, issue 1.

barriers and giant prints of artworks are placed on high-rises. However, the real sensationalism of this story comes from the enthusiastic prose which is stuffed with quotations and facts along with humorous anecdotes. In addition, it is entirely non-critical but still fun to read and useful in its descriptiveness. In the paragraph below I will examine a few features of Dodd's text.

This text is written as narrative account of Dodd's trip downtown to see the downtown renovation project, which is art being displayed in the central Jo'burg streets. Throughout the text the reader senses that s/he is reading a diary of tour through Johannesburg. Dodd uses this engaging and personalised account to catch the attention of the readers and ease them through a large amount of information gathered in a factual report laced and anecdotal stories. For example, in the first two pages we learn that the Johannesburg Development Agency funded the renovations with one percent of their budget, we learn about the architectural company which has designed various parts of the project, we learn about mosaics and the Metro Mall. We also learn of the Johannesburg Development Agency's CEO who is bespectacled and whose "quirky brand of urban freneticism would qualify him for a starring role in a Woody Allen movie."<sup>10</sup> Through extensive use of adjectives and details the text becomes intimate and real to the reader, a clever technique for keeping the reader's attention. These methods of reportage are used throughout the essay and enhanced by quotations from artists and art enthusiasts expressing their own personal encounters with the project. The heavy use of quotations is a common technique in Dodd's work.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 16

*The review section:*

The last major section in *Art South Africa* is the exhibition reviews and book reviews. In this section there are about eleven reviews of varying length, but none more than 1000 words. I will not be looking at many of these, though there are several written by several key authors.

Sean O'Toole's text is a fairly good example of a review. He reviews Tracy Lindner Gander's photography show titled *Flounce*.<sup>11</sup> He looks at aspects of currency in the work and, though he spends little time actually describing the artworks themselves, he discusses other artists who have had similar appeal to popular culture, naming fashion photographers turned artists and artists dealing with youth culture issues. Fashion art naturally attracts young people who are interested in popular culture and are easily drawn in by the stylishness of high fashion. O'Toole claims that the work on this show, which shares similarities with pop culture images like fashion photography, appeals to the youth culture of South Africa. He gives a brief interpretation of the work and why it could have an emotive effect on young people. Though O'Toole hardly describes the artworks at all (thankfully there are colour reproductions of several of the photographs provided alongside the text), this text relays a critical reading of the exhibition, a deeper interpretation which engages with concepts rather than superficial features of the photographs.

This *Art South Africa* issue closes with previews of upcoming exhibitions and also gallery listings. Though I have only examined a small portion of the texts in this issue, I have given a picture of what this edition of *Art South Africa* attempts to provide.

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<sup>11</sup> Sean O'Toole, "Tracy Lindner Gander" *Art South Africa* (Spring, 2002, v 1 no. 1) 55.

In the coming pages I will look at the second issue of the magazine to see what features of its production continue and what is added to improve the magazine.

### **Analysing Volume 1, Issue 2**

*The editorial:*

The second issue of *Art South Africa* begins with an editorial by Perryer that seems to express more confidence about the magazine's situation than the first issue. In the editorial Perryer describes the excitement over the William Kentridge retrospective which will be showing at the South African National Gallery. As a major exhibition shown in the best galleries around the world, it seems to Perryer to be a great privilege to see it here in South Africa, which has often been excluded on exhibition circuits. This great privilege, she writes, should bring "celebration" yet she mentions that Ashraf Jamal is critical of the curators who staged the exhibition as a retrospective in his article for this issue titled "Kentridge Under Erasure."<sup>12</sup> She uses this point to launch into a discussion on the aims of *Art South Africa*, a discussion which, instead of admitting the hardships of art publications as she did in the last issue, she describes the mission of *Art South Africa*.

Perryer describes the criticisms of Ashraf Jamal as a "spirit of healthy inquiry" which causes one to question the premises of the Kentridge retrospective and also "to understand the complex relationship between the work itself and the workings of the art world."<sup>13</sup> This, she writes, "is one of the most constructive things *Art South Africa* can offer." She then describes several specific challenges of writing "critically" in South Africa and what presumably this magazine will fight against with its "spirit of inquiry."

At the end of the editorial she writes, "this is only the second issue but I hope that already

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<sup>12</sup> Perryer, in the Editorial to *Art South Africa* (Summer 2002, v. 1 no. 2) 4. I will describe the arguments made in this essay in the following pages.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

we have taken a path that establishes *Art South Africa* as a challenger of entrenched positions within South African art and a firm and vocal supporter of the richness and variety that emanate from the same source.”<sup>14</sup> From these quotations, I could argue that Perryer has portrayed *Art South Africa* as a martyr for the sake of critical inquiry. Though this sounds a bit extreme, this is where Perryer lays out the position of the magazine, a position which necessarily includes serious criticism. She also mentions in the final paragraph that she hopes to present “diversity of coverage” and an “accessible, engaging read.”<sup>15</sup> Recall that the things she names are similar to the features of discourse named by Terry Eagleton and others in chapter 2. In this editorial we find a clear statement of *Art South Africa*’s aims to become a forum for discourse.

*The features section:*<sup>16</sup>

One comment made in the editorial to this edition of *Art South Africa* suggested that the feature section of this issue was a balance between the dense texts written by Ashraf Jamal and what she calls “lighter” texts by Hazel Friedman and Sean O’Toole. In the editorial Perryer recognises the difference between critical, philosophical texts and descriptive texts. The significance of this comment is that it indicates that the editor has intentionally balanced descriptive are writing with art criticism; *Art South Africa* intends to provide both as equally important aspects of art writing, but with different goals. As we will see in following issue, *Art South Africa* deliberately provides a very diverse mix of descriptive and critical texts. These four feature pieces are in fact

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Note that I’ve skipped the news section. It is much like the previous issue and does not contain anything significantly critical. I will also skip the review section in this issue which would normally be placed after the feature section.

different in their approach to their subject matter and represent a few different ways, both dense and light, of approaching their subject matter. I will discuss these texts below.

The first text in the section is written by Ashraf Jamal and is titled “Kentridge under Erasure.” It is a text of about 1,700 words and is wholly critical, argumentative and opinionated. It is also well grounded in specific evidence and insightful interpretations to back up the arguments made.

In the text Jamal is discussing the recently staged Kentridge exhibition at the South African National Gallery. In the beginning of the text he takes a position contrary to what the curators have supposedly taken in the framing of the exhibition. The curators he writes are, through calling this a retrospective exhibition, positioning Kentridge’s work as though it were now legendary, closed and no longer able to reinvent itself or open itself to new interpretations. The work is relinquished to the fixedness of history through what Jamal terms the “funeral glamour of a retrospective.”<sup>17</sup> In this way, not only does the exhibition take away the future of Kentridge’s work, but this philosophy is contrary to what we learn from Kentridge’s work about the instability of history.<sup>18</sup> On the final page of the text Jamal criticises the curators’ participation in this misrepresentation of Kentridge’s work through the retrospective exhibition; he writes, “The root of the problem, then, lies in how his work has been positioned. Here the prevailing fault lies with the critics, curators, and the hapless public who, knowing better, invariably follow accredited opinion like swine.”<sup>19</sup> Jamal spends most of the text explaining, through a deep interpretation, that the ideas embodied in Kentridge’s technique of erasure and traces, as well as the thematic content in the work is indeed an

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<sup>17</sup> Ashraf Jamal, “Kentridge Under Erasure” *Art South Africa* (Summer, 2002, v. 1 no. 2) 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

“unresolved contradiction” not a “solution to an existing dilemma”<sup>20</sup> and also why it is especially important for Kentridge’s work to question rather than stabilise history in the context of South Africa, where the official story of the public history is still being debated. Jamal’s text takes a position against the status quo represented by the museum exhibition and defends himself with an argument that looks intensely at specific examples.

The second text in the features section is one that Perryer termed “lighter” in her editorial. Titled “Comics Stripped,”<sup>21</sup> in this piece there is a short introduction of about 1000 words describing the comics genre in South Africa followed by an interview with comic artist Andy Mason. The text written by O’Toole, describes the history of comics in South Africa and the role they have played, and still play, in the cultural arena. O’Toole. However, the beginning of the text questions the extent to which there is a national style of comics produced in South Africa. Though O’Toole writes that there is a national style, he admits that the comics are indebted to other comic moguls from the American and European traditions, which he describes in one paragraph. Unfortunately, O’Toole does not explore the question any further, and spends the remainder of the text describing the history of comic from the turn of the century to present day. The article ends with a brief comment on the ability of comics to

...transcend the uncertainty of words. Employing simple gestural lines and a sparse narrative style, the most memorable comics are those that strike a necessary balance between economy and meaning.<sup>22</sup>

Though this text does ask some specific questions about the significance of comics in South Africa, and makes an important note of the importance of the genre in South

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Sean O’Toole “Comics Stripped,” *Art South Africa* (v 1, no. 2) 26-30. Includes an interview.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 28.

African national identity, it does not take on the task of answering that question through an argument, and the critical position of this text is implied rather than specifically stated.

Colin Richards writes the second of the two critical texts we find in the features section. This text represents a type of writing that addresses a question about a specific characteristic of art. In this case Richards takes up a contentious issue and argues for an answer to the question he stages. In this way the text take a critical position, and though not judgmental in the sense that it negates the actions specific people, as Jamal's text did, Richard's texts asked a question, debated the evidence, and came to an end in a conclusive analysis.

In "The Thought is the Thing," a very heavy text of about 2,500 words, Richards discusses the nature of "conceptualism" in current South African art. This text also represents a kind of text which relies on contextual information and art theory to explain its reasoning. In the first section of the text Richards describes what conceptual art is according to internationally known theories. Secondly, he describes the nature of "African Conceptualism" and the theories of African artists and critics and how conceptualism is particularised in the African context. Only in the third section, after about 1,500 words of contextual introduction, we learn about what conceptualism may be in South Africa. In this section Richards states that he will make another argument about conceptualism in South Africa. He writes,

It seems to me that certain cultural conditions over the past four decades provide fertile ground for the fruit of conceptualism in this part of the world. If this holds water at all it is likely that the conceptual impulse lies deeper and is more widespread in our art history than we currently acknowledge.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Colin Richards, "The Thought is the Thing" *Art South Africa* (Summer 2002, v. 1 no. 2) 37.



Without going into too much detail, I would classify the following pages of the text as an analysis of the unique types of conceptualism that exist in South Africa and the artists who practice them.

The feature of Richards' text that is unique compared to the other texts I have looked at up to this point is that it is highly interested in how art theory can be used to analyse, interpret and ultimately make the subject more understandable. Of the texts we have examined, this is the first to make references and allusion to more than just one or two other major theorists, and to use those sources to build up a background of information from which the interpretations naturally arise.

Hazel Friedman is the author of the second of the "lighter" texts in the features section, and is titled "Shooting from the Hip." This is an interesting piece of writing that describes a new fad in the art world—the Lomo camera. The text contains the kind of information that one would expect in an article about a camera. She describes the history of the Lomo camera, its original use and how artists reclaimed it from spurious origins as tools of KGB spies. The camera's uniqueness lies in its ability to be spontaneous, one artist comments;<sup>24</sup> it's a lightweight camera with an excellent lens for close-ups. The text provides a fun, but wholly non-critical look at a new kind of photography and important aspects of the artists' impulses for choosing this medium over conventional cameras.

The texts in this issue make up a significant part of the critical body of works collected in all of the *Art South Africa* volumes,<sup>25</sup> because this edition of the magazine contains many critical and significant texts, or at least more than issue 1 and some of the

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<sup>24</sup> Hazel Friedman "Shooting from the Hip" *Art South Africa* (Summer, 2002, v. 1 no. 2) 45.

<sup>25</sup> The appendix contains a chart which shows the number of critical issues in this issue, and compares it to v. 3, no. 4 issue (described later).

other issues in phase 1. Issues such as national identity and history are taken up with vigour in issue 2. This issue, unlike some other issues, contains several longer art critical essays and shows some of the best work that came out of the phase 1.

### **Criticality in *Art South Africa*, Phase 1**

In this section of my analysis I will be looking at how critiques, art criticism and critiques of institutions or ideas, are used in *Art South Africa*. In several different stages of this research report I argued for the importance of this study by pointing out the necessity of art criticism and art writing in South Africa and throughout this paper I have quoted several people who believe that criticality is essential to the health of art discourse in Africa. Additionally, in this chapter I have pointed out how the editor of *Art South Africa* Sophie Perryer says criticality is a central goal of the magazine in her editorials. Time and time again, criticality appears at the forefront of discussions around art writing and is a central focus of *Art South Africa*.

If criticism really is a cornerstone in the study of art and literature, and if the editor of *Art South Africa* mentions the critical approach as one of the major goals for the magazine, then looking at the art criticism that is provided by *Art South Africa* would be one useful way of determining the nature of the publication. In the next section I will be describing different examples of art criticism that show up in phase 1 publications of *Art South Africa*. These critical texts may be related to the interpretation of art, or may be related to the practices of actors within the art world. They are often concerned with arguing against the something, which is usually, but not always, the established interpretation, or

practice of an artist or institution. In other cases they do not argue against any specific opinion, but in favour of something. In this discussion I will be especially interested in how issues that relate to the specific conditions of the South African society are taken up; though this is not a complete list, included in this will be issues of race and gender, two issues that are on the agenda for discussion, as well as issues of history, archives of past atrocities, and Africa versus the West. Through these topics I have been able to postulate some common trends in types of criticism in *Art South Africa*, but I do not wish to overemphasise the shared features of critical texts since each topic requires different techniques which lead to great diversity in the overall approach.

### Example 1

#### *Example 1 a*

In some critical texts the author takes a strong position in favour of an artist, artist group, style, *et cetera*. I see many examples of this type of art criticism in *Art South Africa*. For example, they have twice published a feature called “Bright Young Things” in which they discuss the work of young artists just beginning their careers. The subtitle to the Autumn 2003 edition of this feature tells us, “Who are the new up-and-coming stars of the South African art world? We predict you’ll be hearing a lot about the eight artists featured here in the future...”<sup>26</sup> Though the article purports to have chosen artists that are up-and-coming, at the same time an article like this does not *only predict* that we will hear about the artists, but *causes*, or at least significantly contributes to, the artists’ popularity. This kind of attention from the three authors, who are already established

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<sup>26</sup> Kathryn Smith, Tracy Murinik and Virginia Mackenny, “Bright Young Things,” *Art South Africa* (v. 1, no. 3) 37-45.

critics and artists and have status in the art world, can help to make these artists successful by advocating on their behalf as in texts like “Bright Young Things.”

### *Example 1b*

There is clearly an interest in supporting local artists by praising their work. Andrew Lamprecht makes this point in the August 2003 edition of *ArtThrob*.<sup>27</sup> His essay is titled “Who critiques the critics?” He writes, “Sometimes there is an undoubted lack of true criticality and perhaps a wariness of “hurting the feelings” of artists whom the critic probably knows socially in the close-knit South African art world.”<sup>28</sup> This could have effects on the aims of art writing, and the limitations set on critics. This catch-22 creates an impulse for critics to write only about what they like, to overemphasise the good features of an artwork while overlooking the bad, or not to write at all (which would be detrimental in a country where there is already a shortage of critics).

Interestingly enough, one of Lamprecht’s essays for Art South Africa is an excellent example of this type of critical text. His text titled “Flash, Aha!” from the 2003 Autumn issue; in the text Lamprecht discusses the work of the Cape Town artist group who go by the name “Flash.” The text begins with this quotation:

Fast cars, women, cash and cocktails: In Cape Town, where a sense of humour can be a seriously rare commodity, a small group of artists is doggedly working at bringing a light touch to the process of art production.<sup>29</sup>

In this first sentence, Lamprecht introduces us to the key principles of the Flash group, as well as the focus that his description will take. Essentially, he paints a picture of Flash as

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<sup>27</sup>Andrew Lamprecht “Who critiques the critics?” *ArtThrob*, [www.artthrob.co.za/0308/news/lamprecht.html](http://www.artthrob.co.za/0308/news/lamprecht.html), accessed March 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Lamprecht, “Flash, Aha!” *Art South Africa* (v. 3, no. 3, Autumn 2004) 49.

committed artists when he describes them as “doggedly working,” and “bringing a light touch,” to a place where “humour can be a seriously rare commodity”<sup>30</sup> seems to imply that Flash is more than just an artist group; they are missionaries to the art scene in Cape Town. This “flashy” and contrary character of the group becomes a central discussion point for Lamprecht in his descriptions. The bulk of the text describes some of the interesting and outrageous stunts pulled by the artists and also the more subdued details of their exhibitions. Then, on pages 49 and 50 Lamprecht makes brief comments about the critics’ response to *Asshole*. On page 49 he writes that *Asshole* was the subject of much debate and criticism. On page 50 he hints at why critics disliked the exhibition when he writes, “While critics complained there was no “real work,” the crowd had a fabulous party.” He takes this up again on page 51 when he writes, “The seeming “easiness” of the work frequently belies the artists’ deep commitment to phenomenal productivity.” From here he explains the difficult and time-consuming labour put into the production of artworks. This whole task serves to negate the criticisms of other critics and promote his own position.

Lamprecht is clearly negotiating for the importance of Flash and helping them to build a reputation as the “bad boy” artists of Cape Town. Primarily he achieves this endorsement by using several conventional methods for canonising the artist. When one reads the text there is a clear feeling that the critic approves of the work; he has nothing negative to say about it. Flash is heroised when he writes that they are “working doggedly” and “bringing a light touch”<sup>31</sup> to the overly serious and critical art crowd. This also characterises the Flash group as a kind of *avant-garde* collaboration that is

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Lamprecht, “Flash, Aha!,” 49.

misunderstood but ahead of their time, much like one would have seen in the early part of the twentieth century with, say, the Dadaists. He even calls the critics “enemies,” which seems a particularly undeserved tag, because he never explains how the critics’ criticisms escalate to such loathing that they deserve to be named as “enemies.” Lamprecht’s congratulatory tone is actually an argument for the superiority of the Flash philosophy over and against the mainstream art crowd.

### **Example 2**

In this section I will discuss what could be called “institution critiques.” By this term I mean both literal institutions for education, as well as other public programs, public collections, or any other place or group that is not devoted to the production of art objects, but to the structure of the art world, education, or economic issues. The second important part of this term is that they are “critiques.” That is, these texts are not just news, but include interpretations about these institutions. These interpretations may not be negating what the institution does or stands for, but the authors of this type of text do take a position as they interpret the institution’s motives and goals as well as its importance, historically and presently.

The example that I would like to use is an article on the Johannesburg Art Gallery, a viable institution, and an important player in educating and disseminating art knowledge.<sup>32</sup> This institution also has a significant role in urban community projects due to its location in downtown Johannesburg’s Joubert Park, a neighbourhood full of dangerous slums and violent crimes. In this essay titled “Back on the Map,” Alex Dodd,

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<sup>32</sup> Other examples could include “The art of networking” by Hazel Friedman (v. 1, no. 3), which discusses VANSA. Or “Archiving the 80s” by Mario Pissarro (v. 1, no. 3) which gives a critical account of efforts to preserve resistance art, or “Institutional Fantasies” by Nic Dawes (v. 2, no. 2) which discusses the National Gallery. There are many other examples as well.

whom I have discussed earlier in this chapter, questions whether or not the museum fits the community in which it is located. Though the text offers a lot of newsy information, it also takes a position that supports the gallery's actions.

Dodd begins her essay by introducing the story of how Kendell Geers criticised the museum quite vocally for its negligence in caring for artworks, which led to the theft of one of his works from the museum.<sup>33</sup> Dodd writes, "Geer's grievances ultimately served to add credence to the conservative line that a bourgeois art institution has no place in the thick of a high-density black urban neighbourhood like Joubert Park, where both art and art lovers are at risk."<sup>34</sup> The frustration of this situation, both for the museum patrons as well as the museum's staff is adequately explained by this quotation. Contrary to what one would expect after this unpromising picture of the museum, Dodd's essay shows remarkable enthusiasm about the new work at this museum, so the bleakness of the situation she describes in the first paragraphs of the essay emphasises the significance of its turnaround.

The description of the new projects speaks of the changes that have been made to the museum and new programs that are drawing large crowds of visitors, including projects she describes as "poverty alleviation through skills development"<sup>35</sup> which reach out to the museum's immediate community. In this text the author was committed to critiquing the work of the museum, establishing the effectiveness of its new programs and paying particular attention to how it has transformed in accordance to new social needs in a more multicultural setting. Dodd compiles examples to support her affirmation of the gallery's program goal. It is not an assessment of the art on display at the Johannesburg

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<sup>33</sup> Alex Dodd, "Back on the Map," *Art South Africa*, v. 1 no. 4, 31-35, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 34.

Art Gallery, but an evaluation of policy and goals taken up by this important institution acting within the South African art world.

### Example 3

In this section I will focus on examples that look at issues of race and gender. As I mentioned above, these issues are taken up frequently as they continue to be pressing issues in South African discourse. The special attention paid to these subjects and the way that they are discussed in *Art South Africa* reflects the agendas of the editor and others involved in the publication of the magazines. More importantly, *Art South Africa* accomplishes its goal of being a “critical voice” within this very important debate.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Example 3a*

The two essays, “Staging the Rainbow Nation” by Dagmawi Woubshet, and “Decolonising the Mind” by Mario Pissarra were written as responses to the film “The Luggage is Still Labelled: Blackness in South African Art,” a film by Vuyile Voyiya and Julie McGee, shown at the South African Association of Art Historians conference in 2002. These two texts are part of a section of *Art South Africa* where several authors offer a critical discussion of an “issue” and then another author responds to their texts with a very brief commentary.

It is important to understand some of the opinions put forward by Woubshet and Pissarra. In the film, according to Woubshet and Pissarra, black artists talk about their experiences of continuing inequality in the “democratic” South African art market.

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<sup>36</sup> There are many other excellent examples of this type of text. I would first point to Thembinkosi Goniwe’s article “Painted Black” (*Art South Africa*, Spring, 2003, 42-47). Other similar examples could be Rory Bester’s text on Claudette Schreuders “Living in Linden” (*Art South Africa*, v. 2 no. 3, 24-30) which discusses “whiteness” in some detail. Bruce Haines discusses the significance of black artists painting in western style in his article on Johannes Phokela (*Art South Africa*, v. 1 no. 1, 34-38). In a slightly different topic, Charl Blignaut discusses gender and identity in “Crawling, Flying, Singing,” a text on Steven Cohen (*Art South Africa*, v. 1 no. 4, 38-44). Many other shorter pieces such as reviews also take up race or closely related subjects.



Though an effort was made to hear individual voices in the film, Woubshet points out that the narrative runs together so that the viewer feels that all the featured artists have experienced the same thing. He writes, “the disjointed editing undermines individual perspective and specificity. Bits and fragments from several artists are juxtaposed to render a seamless narrative.”<sup>37</sup> He then comments that this technique “reifies the commonplace notion of representing black artists as undifferentiated.”<sup>38</sup> However, Woubshet also praises the efforts of the film to expose how racial prejudice is still limiting black artists. He writes of the film,

...it reveals serious concerns facing South African institutions of fine art, concerns which not only affect the works and lives of black artists directly but also the possibility of achieving racially egalitarian institutions in this new democracy...Art Historians Michael Godby...and Sandra Klopper...demanded of both the filmmakers and featured artists that they edit the documentary and particularly the part in which they are personally critiqued, underscores what I mean by a politics of innocence. The relentless impulse to censor and silence black artist is exactly what the documentary exposes.<sup>39</sup>

In sum, Woubshet finds that the film’s portrayal of the situation of black artists is inaccurate, but acknowledges its important function: it explores what seems to the makers of the film as the universality of black artists’ exclusion from education, market, critical discourse—access points into the circuit of art hegemony. Still, he prompts readers to work more concerted towards achieving true equality.

Pissarra’s response essay offers a different slant on the situation presented by “The Luggage is Still Labelled.” Pissarra acknowledges that there is indeed inequality in the art market and art institutions but suggests that the account given by black artists is also an inaccurate history. He puts forward two important critiques: First, progress

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<sup>37</sup> Dagmawi Woubshet, “Staging the Rainbow Nation” *Art South Africa*. (v. 2, no. 2) 35.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

towards equalization does occur and in our history of blackness in South African art, one must not discount those small changes. Secondly, (and more importantly for our discussion) Pissarra argues that reducing the problem of unequal representation to black versus white is a destructive simplification of the subaltern's struggle. Indeed, the history of South Africa includes many, many marginalized people. Pissarra writes, "In highlighting class culture and gender it has been my aim to argue that within the contemporary South African context it is not only colour that is critically important. Privileging colour at the expense of these other factors may create one model of equity but it will contribute towards defining new inequalities."<sup>40</sup> Pissarra recommends that all African nations be united under "Africanness" and reclaim the non-western aspects of South African identity. Despite the impossibility of such a plan, Pissarra demonstrates how the subaltern project desires to change the situation of black artists through a change in the elite's worldview; the subaltern is engaged when the elite (along with all other African peoples) redefines their identity,

Woubshet and Pissarra, communicate more than just their interpretation of the film, they also communicate to us a specific ethical principle related to the race debate. Using the features of the film, such as the type of documentation and the questionable accuracy of the interviews, the authors use their analysis of the film to articulate their ideological position.

### *Example 3b*

The next example I have chosen represents a different perspective on the representation of racial identity in art. For this next example I will use a text by Liese van der Watt titled "Disappearing Act," which appeared in the Winter 2003 issue of *Art South*

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<sup>40</sup> Mario Pissarra, "Decolonising the Mind" *Art South Africa* (Summer, 2003. 37-41) 39.

*Africa*.<sup>41</sup> The text discusses the work of artist Berni Searle, whose work often raises racial issues related to skin colour.

This text begins by clearly stating that the author's approach to the racial issues in Searle's work will be different from what the author sees as the normative interpretations.

Van der Watt writes,

Looking at the many catalogues and reviews that outline the meteoric rise of this year's Standard Bank Young Artist, Berni Searle, I am similarly struck by a certain repetitive reading of work that seems to be limited, somehow arrested by such interpretations.<sup>42</sup>

This statement illustrates how the author perceives the discourse around Searle's work to be something similar to the discourse on "art as a tool for the struggle"—a discourse that was not wrong but slighted the complexity and polyvalence of art. Indeed, as the reader can see more clearly in the next paragraph, the author is suggesting that there is more to Searle's work than the current, common discourse provides. She explains this by writing,

Searle's work apparently evokes a specific critique that always insists on relating her work to the racial binaries that scar South African history—which is of course inevitable given the firm reality of this place and time. But in the rush to situate her work in the mire of racial politics, at least as much is lost as is gained... But I want to suggest nevertheless that Searle's art is less about the politics of race than about what Jane Blocker has described in her reading of Cuban artist Ana Mendieta's work as "the life long process of coming to terms with the estrangement that is the soul of identity."<sup>43</sup> True, many of Searle's works call for a racialised analysis. With titles such as *Discoloured*, *Colour Me*, *Colour Matters*, *A Darker Shade of Light*, *Off-White* and *Snow White*, one cannot ignore the barbed play on racial categories and classification... But deeper than the surface of the skin, Searle's work points also to other trauma.<sup>44</sup>

Through descriptions of the work the point van der Watt proves most emphatically is that Searle's work is as much about the problems concerning

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<sup>41</sup> Liese van der Watt, "Disappearing Act" (*Art South Africa*, v. 1 no. 4, winter 2003, 23-28).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>43</sup> Van der Watt references Jane Blocker "Where is Ana Mendieta?" *Identity, Performativity, and Exile*. (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1999,) 74.

<sup>44</sup> Van der Watt, 24.

fixedness/fluidity of identity as it is about racial identity. If it is true that discussions of Searle's work are not often broadened to include the points made by van der Watt, then this essay does much to reevaluate the familiar readings of this artist. Additionally, texts such as this one will encourage re-evaluations that work towards deepening our understanding of other artists tagged as "black" artists who deal with issues of blackness. In this case the position taken by the author is one that requires a look at the visual features of the work to determine a better interpretation of the artist's work; however, this argument also makes an important critique about how artworks can be oversimplified by categorical, racialised interpretations.

## **Chapter 4: *Art South Africa*, Phase 2**

In the previous chapter I examined the first two volumes of the magazine *Art South Africa*. In the eight issues discussed in chapter 2 there were a number of critical texts, dealing with a variety of issues in the South African art world. Additionally, the editorial to the magazine describes how critical texts are an important aspect of the magazine and that the magazine will intentionally include critical texts. This shows that *Art South Africa* does indeed include aspects of criticality and that its editor sees this as an important part of the magazine's character. In chapter 4, I will discuss criticality as it is manifest in the second set of *Art South Africa* issues, volumes 3 and 4. For these volumes Sean O'Toole had taken over the position of editor and made major changes to the magazine which have shaped the particular way that critical issues are presented. In the pages below I will be looking at additional ways in which criticality is implanted in the texts of this magazine.

### **Analysis of Phase 2**

In the first few issues of Sean O'Toole's reign as editor for *Art South Africa* noticeable changes were made to the format and style of the magazine. Evidence in this chapter will show that Sean O'Toole's editorship makes a great effort to fulfil Perryer's characterisation of *Art South Africa* as a critical voice, and that the changes O'Toole makes cause *Art South Africa* to expand and improve its critical discourse.

As seen in the previous chapter, *Art South Africa* tried to provide a diverse range of texts, but Perryer noted that criticality was one of the more important things that could be provided by the magazine. Indeed, the first issues of *Art South Africa* did provide a

critical look at art and the art world. *Art South Africa* evolves from the first issue to the last issue in my study, volume 4, no. 4. The number of critical texts remains nearly the same throughout the issues, but in O’Toole’s issues the presentation of those texts adds an aspect of dialogue and a greater diversity of perspectives and an overall sense that the magazine is a forum for discourse.

In the following pages I will analyse some of the features of the second phase of *Art South Africa* and pay particular attention to the features that have been changed, such as the addition of the letters section and the use of theme topics on which the major essays in the issue are based. I have chosen to look at volume 3, number 4, because in this issue a number of changes take place; perhaps it could be argued that it is in this issue that the greatest number of overt changes occur. Certainly this does not imply that O’Toole was not already making changes to the format and content of *Art South Africa*. In the issue before the one I discuss here there were already changes being made to the features section.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Analysis of Volume 3, Issue 4**

Flipping through the pages of this issue several of the stylistic changes can be identified immediately. The overall effect that appears on first glance is that there is more text and many images condensed onto each page. Some pages have been packed with text by reducing margins and pushing columns closer together. Lines have been added to separate columns. However most of the sections have remained about the same length, with the exception of the review section, which is several pages longer than the average

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<sup>1</sup> I am basing this on the addition of the “Letters to the Editor Section” and the introduction of a sort of philosophical theme for the major texts. Additionally there are some formatting changes, such as font size, page layout that change in this issue. Interestingly, in volume 5, issue 1, which will not be part of this study, has undergone another facelift, as the magazine has a new front cover logo.

of phase 1 review sections<sup>2</sup>. Volume 3, issue 4 contains thirty-one exhibition reviews and three book reviews. This more than doubles the average of phase 1, though most of the reviews in this issue from phase 2 are quite short compared to those in phase 1.<sup>3</sup>

*The editorial:*

In the editorial O'Toole introduces a theme for the issue and describes why it is an important discussion point for the art world and readers of *Art South Africa*. In the editorial O'Toole explains that he is interested in looking at different kinds of neglect in the art world. Here the word neglect means to purposefully, accidentally or indifferently overlook things, or people. Most importantly neglect can be done out of "wilfulness"<sup>4</sup> a type of neglect known best by artists working contrary to the Apartheid government, or those discriminated against, marginalised or completely excluded on account of their skin colour. He claims that now these artists "have boldly captured the public imagination"<sup>5</sup> in the freedom of democratic South Africa.

O'Toole claims that neglect is also practiced on the basis of prejudices besides race, such as the prejudices against certain forms of art or styles of representation which are unpopular. Sometimes what is not avant-garde, and contemporary-looking, O'Toole argues, is excluded because it doesn't fit the normative standards by which many critics judge contemporary art's quality and relevance. In this issue O'Toole indicates that this issue must be read with the concept of neglect in mind. Some texts in issue will look at artists who are or have been neglected.

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<sup>2</sup>On average phase 1 ran about 15 texts and rarely differed from that number. In phase 2 this number ranges from about 20 to 31.

<sup>3</sup> See appendix for a detailed chart of this issue in this comparison to a phase 1 issue.

<sup>4</sup> Sean O'Toole, editorial to *Art South Africa* (v. 3, no. 4) 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

In my discussion I am paying particular attention to criticality and how *Art South Africa* acts as a critical voice. This editorial sets up a situation where it would be possible for the writers in this issue to take critical positions on the subject of neglect. O’Toole has already taken a critiquing position on the subject by pointing a finger at the injustices of neglecting people from a non-white population group, which implies a critique of the neglectful Apartheid government and prejudices against certain stylistic modes. Even the word neglect implies a critique since it nearly always implies wrongdoing. Now the authors of the texts in this issue will argue for the significance of neglected artists and our obligation to move them from the margins to centre stage, a process that is inherently critical.

*The Letters to the Editor Section:*

Of all the changes instituted in *Art South Africa* in this issue, I think this is the most significant, at least in the domain of my research. In this section readers are allowed to have their say about previous issues or other events in the art world. In this issue there are two letters. The first is a very long letter written by Thembinkosi Goniwe, who responds to what he believes was a poorly written and researched article that appeared in *Art South Africa*. Goniwe is very critical of the author’s mistakes and makes the point clear through his exhaustive and convincing argument. Tim Hopwood has written the second letter, which was first found on a bulletin board at SA Photo Centre. This letter challenges art critics and artists who are not sufficiently self-critical and who “merely pay lip service to postmodernism” but fail to look at the power structures they have created.<sup>6</sup> Though there are only two letters in this issue, in the coming issues there are usually more. These letters make significant contributions to the overall level of criticality in the

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<sup>6</sup> Tim Hopwood, Letter to the editor, *Art South Africa* (v. 3 no. 4), 17.



magazine and the sense that the magazine does provide a dialogue. Much more will be said about the inclusion of the letters later in this chapter.

*The News Section:*

In this section the texts have become considerably shorter than those seen in phase 1 editions of *Art South Africa*. In the two examples I looked at in depth from Sophie Perryer's stint as editor, the texts ranged from about 400 to 1000 words and never included texts like the "snippets" of about 100 words that are seen in phase 2 issues. I randomly selected one of the phase 1 issues and calculated the average and median word length for texts in the news section.<sup>7</sup> Of the seven texts the average came to 778 words per text and the median number was 750. In this issue of phase 2 (volume 3, number 4) the average of 14 sample texts came to 376 words and perhaps more telling, the median number was 300 words.<sup>8</sup> The longest text is about 1000 words (but this is the only text over 500 words) and the shortest is fewer than 50 words long.

Though number calculations may seem like an impractical way to analyse the content of *Art South Africa*, I think the numbers are a clear representation of how O'Toole changes the content of the magazine even through subtle changes like shortening the average length of texts. What is the effect of shrinking the texts in the news section? The news section has not changed much in the number of pages. In phase 2 the texts are divided into five sections, four are articles, one is the "News Roundup" which contains all of the short texts by various authors, and one is the "Letters to the Editor" section, which I dealt with as a separate section.

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<sup>7</sup> I selected volume 2 number 4 for this experiment. It contained 7 texts in the news section. The numbers I used to calculate were rounded to the nearest 50 words. These were 1000, 1000, 500, 600, 600, 1000, 750.

<sup>8</sup> As for the example from phase 1 I rounded each of the texts to the nearest 50 words. These were: 650, 100, 250, 50, 400, 300, 400, 100, 100, 100, 500, 100, <50, 500, 1000.

Overall the effect of this revamped section gives one the sense that this really is the “news” section, not reviews, not editorials or feature essays. In previous issues the author had sufficient space to make arguments and discuss the topic in a sort of philosophical, speculative manner; and though the news pieces were not always critiques, they often reflected (not opined) on some aspect of the topic. In this revamped news section the news is delivered much more like public announcements in the newspapers, straightforward and without opinion or reflection since there is little more than a few sentences in which to reflect.<sup>9</sup> In this way the shortened texts represent how O’Toole has curbed the tendency for these texts to become more like reviews than accounts of the news. Simply by reformatting the shapes and sizes, O’Toole has given an entirely different character to the news section.

As a cautionary note, not all of the issues in phase 2 are the same and the news section’s format changes somewhat in each of the issues. In some of the issues<sup>10</sup> I also found that there are excessively long opinion pieces on the news, which are exactly like those I have discussed in phase 1. When this is the case, there is little difference between the two phases handling of this section.

The shorter texts in the news section discuss items such as upcoming conferences and international exhibition news. In the longer pieces Kim Gurney discusses new galleries in Cape Town, Robyn Sassen gives a report on FNB Dance Umbrella, which

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<sup>9</sup> I would judge that only the three of the fifteen texts that appear in this issue (v. 3 no. 4) contain opinionated statements or reflection. These are the 1000 word piece by Ivan Vladislavi\_, the 500 word piece by Robyn Sassen and a 300 word text by Mads Damsbo.

<sup>10</sup> For example in v. 4, no. 3 the news section discusses eKapa in detail. There are several commentaries which contain opinions in the form of “reflections” (see text by Kim Gurney and the reflects by five of the attendees) which amount to several pages of text.

contains some affirmative criticism and analysis. Ivan Vladislavi\_ gives a personal account of the Taxi Series book he has written on William Boshoff.

The news section contains about fifteen individual texts. I have only discussed a few of those here. However, what I have discussed in this section above should make the differences between phase 1 and phase 2 clear. In the next section I will determine if there are similarly significant changes made to the features section.

*The Features Section:*

The theme of “neglect” that O’Toole set up in the editorial comes into effect in this section. Many of the texts in this section somehow reflect the theme and comment, in one way or another, on the problem of neglect and how it has been important in the South African context. Some of the texts are not explicitly critical and do not take a position, but all make significant contributions to our understanding of neglect. I intend to show in my analysis below that, together, the texts work to provide a critical understanding, a philosophical understanding and an historical understanding of the concept neglect. In effect, because the texts work together (more or less) they produce a collective text—a whole product with diverse approaches, much like an anthology. This is another one of the major changes that O’Toole has put into effect in phase 2.

The first text is a critical evaluation of an already canonised artist and is written by famed art writer Ivor Powell.<sup>11</sup> In this text he discusses Dumile Feni, no doubt as response to the Johannesburg Art Gallery’s retrospective of the artist. How the text relates to the idea of neglect is not exactly self-evident. The author does not state that the artist has been neglected, but O’Toole has already presented the case that the Apartheid regime neglected black artists. One can see how Powell’s discussion of Feni’s search for

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<sup>11</sup> Ivor Powell, “Dumile Feni: Struggle for Identity” *Art South Africa* (v. 3, no. 4) 30-39.

identity (and our contemporary search for his identity through this text) can be related to the idea of neglect, though nowhere in the text does Powell use the term. The most obvious way in which Feni has been neglected was of course that he could never receive full recognition as an artist, or even as an equal, by many of his peers in the art world in South Africa during that time. His exile represents the idea of something lost, by the artist and by South Africa, which is the inevitable consequence of prolonged neglect. But the associations between neglect and this text are somewhat loose. In the second text in this section the relationship is made clear.

The second text in this section discusses the artist Leigh Voigt and is written by Sean O'Toole. Not surprisingly, this text exemplifies some of the theoretical discussions on the concept of neglect that O'Toole put forward in the editorial. This text reviews and interprets an artist who has been an outsider to the critical, 'high' art world because her work does not fit general standards of what contemporary ( or avant-garde) art should look like. Voigt paints in a style that is recognisably "naturalist," not radical or postmodern. This particular article discusses her paintings of roaming cattle. O'Toole describes her work and her attitudes towards her discipline beautifully, but for my discussion I am more interested in the theoretical ideas that introduce and end the text. In the opening lines he writes, "The privileging of imagery in everyday culture come into sharp focus in the work of Leigh Voigt."<sup>12</sup> Later, in a response to the artist's discussion of her work, he writes, "Within the broader avant-garde, neither gesture is very fashionable. The outcome is a critical neglect in which Voigt is left to exist much like her pictorial

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<sup>12</sup> Sean O'Toole, "Notes on a Bushveld Naturalist," *Art South Africa* (V. 3, no. 4, 2005), 46.

subjects in ‘splendid isolation.’”<sup>13</sup> Of course, O’Toole is suggesting that very valuable discourse about the work is lost, due to the prejudice against Voigt’s approach. This concept is furthered in O’Toole’s final comment, “Why is it always necessary to categorise products of labour with visual intent? What is gained by the action? What is lost?”<sup>14</sup>

The third text is written by Sanford Shaman<sup>15</sup> and discusses a topic that is deeply problematic in South Africa: what is to be done with neglected buildings that are historically important? In many cases the once beautiful buildings, many of which are extraordinary examples of art deco architecture, have fallen to ruin, but in the case of the Old Mutual Building in Cape Town, the subject of this text, something has been done to reverse the effect of neglect. The building has been restored and will be used again; and this proves that, despite some subtly racist artistic features, the building is still a valuable piece of architecture and a kind of historical monument.

The final text from the features section that I will discuss here is a piece that contains three perspectives on the concept of neglect.<sup>16</sup> Three art writers, Jillian Carman, Mario Pissara, and Wilhelm van Rensburg give their opinions about what the word means to them; each author answers in a different context and with different viewpoints. This “perspectives” piece represents a new impulse in the *Art South Africa* features section to include more voices and more perspectives on the theme issue. This “perspectives” feature takes different forms throughout phase 2, but the concept of including many

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. The term “splendid isolation” is quoted by O’Toole from John Manning and Peter Goldblatt’s essay “A greater glory” *South African Botanical Art* (Fernwood Press, 2001), which he references on page 46.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>15</sup> Sanford Shaman, “The heights of contradiction” *Art South Africa* (v. 3, no. 4) 50-54.

<sup>16</sup> This series of texts is titled “Three Thoughts on Neglect” and runs from page 40-44.

different writers giving their own opinions, reflections and criticisms is carried through all the issues of phase 2 and is clearly a change from the phase 1.

From this discussion of the important aspects of the features section I have demonstrated that several changes have been made to this section in the second phase of the journal's life. Notably, each of the three articles and the "perspectives" feature is critical. Each of the authors argues for a particular position. The effect of the anthology of various points of view on the theme topic is significant; it seems that when the responses, reflections, descriptions and critiques work together on one topic a sort of dialogue arises, something which was not seen in phase 1. This will be discussed at length in the coming pages.

*The review section:*

In this section the most noticeable difference between this issue and phase I is that the average number of reviews has grown significantly. In previous issues the average number was fourteen to fifteen reviews per issue and all of about the same length. In this issue from phase 2 the number has grown to thirty-one, plus three book reviews. The reviews vary in length due to the introduction of the "Reviews in Brief" section which covers seventeen shows each in about 400 words. In this review section the number of artists that receive exposure has almost doubled. And while there is less room for complete description and analysis, the upside is that there are more authors writing reviews and there is a much greater variety of shows covered and more artists will be publicised.

In the paragraphs above I have reviewed each of the major sections in one of the phase 2 copies of *Art South Africa*. This establishes the types of structural changes that

have been made in phase 2. I have also hinted at some of the ways in which this issue, with its renovated features section and letters included, has given this issue a different kind of criticality.

### **The Theme Topics in Volume 4**

In the next four issues following the issue I have just described, O'Toole continues to make changes to the magazine's features section and try new ways of presenting the themed texts. The key distinction between phase 1 and 2, in this section, is that in phase 1 nearly every issue is "the same" and very few changes takes place in any of those eight issues. There is never a significantly new approach to arranging the texts, or new tactics in their arguments, or new features. In phase 2 each issue is designed in a slightly different way. It is particularly important to discuss because the theme topics, which are usually a series of longer articles, provide a sort of breeding ground for new approaches to presenting the texts. Additionally, as I have argued in the previous section describing issue 4 of volume 3, the features section is one of the primary ways in which O'Toole brings together critiques or responses to the theme topics which works to create a critical discourse. In the following section I will describe how the theme topics and the series of texts which discuss the theme promote criticality and critical discourse.

#### **Volume 4, Issue 1**

This issue, like the others, employs a unique method of presentation of the texts in the feature section. The editorial clearly states a central theme issue and presents a number of different perspectives on the subject to give a wide-reaching reflection on numerous opinions with which the reader can engage and draw their own, well-informed conclusions. The theme in this issue is a significant critical debate that already carries the

weight of controversy. It would be difficult to look at this issue without a critical perspective since it is already highly contentious. The theme is “Power and Influence” and many of the texts in the features section deal with those issues. The section on the theme is titled “The Power Game” and under that heading it contains three critical essays and one text that is a list and description of the most influential people in South African art. Through these texts the magazine takes a critical and self-critical look at the topic by including reflections on how power works and affects the art world, internationally and in South Africa.

What interests me most in this edition of *Art South Africa* is how explicitly O’Toole states his intention to create a space for critical inquiry through this theme. In the editorial he writes, “In a detour from the format of past issues, we interrogate notions of power and influence in the South African art world. An admittedly self-reflexive enquiry, this activity is not intended as a destructive or ‘closed discussion on current art,’ to quote Venice Biennale co-curator Maria de Corral. Rather the idea is to shift the debate to ‘an open space where the desire to exchange experiences, ideas, reflections and to provoke them can be fulfilled.’”<sup>17</sup> In the last sentence the “open space” described unmistakably resembles the definition of a public forum for critical discourse that was discussed in chapter 2. O’Toole clearly states his intentions for this issue to serve as more than just a journal with a few critical perspectives but as a place that sponsors discourse, including conversation, responses and an assortment of different ideas.

O’Toole’s clear statement of his plans for this issue continues into “The Power Game” series of texts in an introduction to the features section. He writes the introduction

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<sup>17</sup> Sean O’Toole, editorial for *Art South Africa* (v. 4 no. 1) 10.



to the texts and gives his rationale for the theme. He explains one of the many important reasons for this theme by quoting Olu Oguibe:

In his book *The Culture Game*, Olu Oguibe remarks: ‘Ironically the contemporary art world is one of the last bastions of backwardness in the west today, which makes it an uneven playground, a formidable terrain of difficulty for artists whose backgrounds locate at the receiving end of intolerance.’<sup>18</sup>

This is true for South Africa and a necessary point of discussion. In the following paragraphs O’Toole analyses several of the ways power has shaped the current state of art in South Africa, particularly the role that race plays. Another important point made, was that the idea of critiquing power and also drawing up a list of the most influential people in South Africa, is a difficult project and will provoke some significant criticism, but is still a valuable project. The admission that there will be valid criticism of *Art South Africa* is an important characteristic of a genuinely open forum.

As seen from the quotations above, O’Toole openly names criticality, discourse and self-reflexivity as goals for the text. These goals probably existed in phase 1 as well, but never were they so carefully and scrupulously laid out as they are in this issue. At most, Perryer devoted a few sentences to explaining the magazine’s position on “criticality.” O’Toole clearly states what this issue is attempting to do and then explains why it is significant.

The three articles do discuss the topic critically, heeding the intentions of the editor, and they also bring up their own unique critical points or interpretations of power. Rory Bester discusses the nature of money in relation to power and influence. Kim Gurney discusses debates around the role of institutions such as galleries and schools in our understanding of what art is or its value. Olu Oguibe’s text is perhaps more closely

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<sup>18</sup> Sean O’Toole, “Same Scene, Different Date” *Art South Africa* (v. 4 no. 1) 43.

aligned with the subject of influence. He writes about the influence of Western art and theories in non-Western art in past and in contemporary art. After these three texts there is a listing of the most influential people in the South African art world, including short biographies written by O'Toole, Bester and Gurney. The list was drawn up by local critics and art historians who nominated those artists, curators, writers and patrons they thought were most influential.

The texts described above make up the entirety of the section devoted to the theme topic. However, in wake of the discourse on power, perhaps with some analysis, the surrounding texts in the features section can be seen in a similar light. For example the text on artist Robin Rhode which appears before "The Power Game" describes the new-found fame of the young artist. In an interview, Robin Rhode discusses his fame and financial successes. Another text takes a critical position to defend the hero status that has been attributed to Nelson Mandela. The author of this text takes up the question of how much power should be given to one person. I do not know if these texts were meant to be read as part of the "power" theme, but it seems to me that, with this framework of critical discourse taking a determining role in this magazine, critical analysis of the entire issue under the influence of the discourse on power seems natural and necessary.

### **Volume 4, Issue 2**

The second issue I will discuss takes a different sort of topic as its theme. In this issue the artistic medium of paint, or rather the practice of painting, is discussed. The series of texts in this issue "The Painting Special Issue" as it is described in the table of contents, does not contain highly judgemental critiques as did the last issue, but offers a discourse that is made up of many different positions on the nature of painting. The artists

and critics give their own interpretations about painting, the styles and methods they use or how to engage with the work. This gives the reader a broad spectrum of positions on painting.

In the painting issue there are eighteen short texts and one longer text, which introduces the history and conflicted meanings of painting. Penny Siopis wrote this longer text which is entitled “Notes on a Carnal Pleasure.”<sup>19</sup> Siopis introduces many of the critical issues surrounding the definition of painting, as opposed to other disciplines. She also postulates what painting has been in South Africa, describing several contemporary artists. The history Siopis provides is also interspersed and concluded with the author’s own ideas about what painting “is”. The short texts are a collection of interviews with and reviews of artists who are primarily known as painters. The texts vary, but all of them describe the particular artist’s method of painting. So, for example, Hazel Friedman writes of John Meyer, “Paint is a mysterious world in which the ultimate transformation of materials takes place.”<sup>20</sup> Or, Penny Siopis writes, “Painting can’t give the slice of life of photography and photography can’t give the embodiedness of painting.”<sup>21</sup> Quotations like these give a taste of the kind of interpretive nature of these texts, which express the artist’s feelings about their medium and the emotive effects of the paintings.

Though the discussion on paintings may not carry the same tension as the critical debates in the issue on power and influence, it is still a necessary discussion. Through these nineteen texts the writers engage in a sort of symposium on paintings, where different interpretive positions are discussed. The readers digest all of these texts and gain

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<sup>19</sup> Penny Siopis, *Art South Africa* (v. 4, no. 2) 28-29.

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Mackenny, *Art South Africa* (v. 4, no. 2) 32.

<sup>21</sup> Siopis, *Art South Africa* (v. 4, no. 2) 29.

a broader understanding of history and meaning of painting in South Africa, which has value as great as the debate on power plays.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

From my discussion of the critical issues and the new features that are instituted by O'Toole, I can argue that a different kind of criticality appears in phase 2. Whether there are more or fewer critical texts is one way of determining the level of criticality. I could add up the number of critical texts to determine which one has a greater number of critical texts, but I do not think this would be an accurate measure of the overall criticality of the magazines. The improved critical discourse that appears under Sean O'Toole's editorship is a result of the way he presents and arranges critical texts, not the number of texts. In the key words section of the introduction to this paper<sup>22</sup> I used the analogy that a discourse without dialogue is like arguing with one's self in an empty room; it may be talk about art, but it doesn't accomplish much and is hardly a fair, unbiased discussion. Phase 1 of *Art South Africa* seems a little like that. Phase 2, on the other hand, has completely redirected the nature of the criticism by adding dialogue and diversity; essentially, the "empty room" from the analogy has become a symposium with many people involved. In the next pages I will give my arguments for this conclusion and explain which of the changes introduced by O'Toole helped to create this type of discourse.

First, there is an open forum for readers to respond to articles they read in *Art South Africa*, or make general comments about art in South Africa. The Letters to the Editor section contributes this feature of the public discourse. The ability for the general

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<sup>22</sup> Refer to page 8 and 9, in chapter 1.

readers to respond with their opinions about a topic is a key element of a discourse, since a good discourse must be constructed by opinions from all those who use it.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned,<sup>24</sup> a discourse is a conversation, a debate that includes two or more people and in which people have the ability to respond to each other. The letters section even allows readers to critique *Art South Africa* if they do not like what is presented.<sup>25</sup> This gives the sense that the readers do actually have some sway over what will be presented in the magazine.

Secondly, there is more variety in formats of the feature section texts in phase 2 issues of *Art South Africa*. In phase 1 there is an almost unvarying presentation of texts in the feature section. There are only four to five texts per issue, all of about the same length. In some issues of phase 2 there are just a handful of texts,<sup>26</sup> but in others there are many. As we saw in the examples I described, one contained five loosely related texts (volume 3, 4); Volume 4, issue 1 contained an interview, a series of texts on David Goldblatt, a series of texts on power and influence, a text on Nelson Mandela; the “Painting Special Issue,” volume 5, issue 2 contained one text unrelated to the theme, then one longer essay to introduce the “painting” theme, and eighteen short essays on painting. Each of these issues is different, and each of the other issues from this phase, which I have not described, is also all unique. This technique of changing formats can be

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<sup>23</sup> In many ways this is not the practice of most discourse participants who seek to control and exclude the “outsiders” but there is a growing interest in including a more “general” public as well. Most notably Edward Said argues for this in “Opponent, Audiences, Constituencies and Community” found in *Art in Theory: an anthology of changing ideas*, Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992 Rpt. 1993), 1086-1088. See chapter 2, page 26 for discussion of Said’s text.

<sup>24</sup> See the key words, page 8-9. Also see in chapter 2 Foucault’s idea of the accessibility of discourse on page 24.

<sup>25</sup> I am referring to the letter by Theminkosi Goniwe in the first pages of this chapter, but there are other examples such as a critique of the Power and Influence issue (discussed above) by Brenden Grey in V. 4 no 2 and many others.

<sup>26</sup> For example the “Picasso and Africa” theme contains 11 texts (v. 4, no, 4). The “Avant-garde” theme contains 7 texts. A representative of smaller theme section would be v. 3, no 4. which contained only 4 themed texts.

argued to represent two principles. First, O'Toole is actively trying out new types of articles to see which format is better and which worse, though this may not be an explicit goal.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, the exploration of a variety of answers to the questions asked in a discourse is a good principle, since a public discourse, which seeks to benefit the public through its conclusions, is most effective when it is teleological and works to find at least a partial solution to the debate; this can only happen after many options are explored.

On a similar note, in Sean O'Toole's set of texts there is a significant increase in the number of writers per issue. O'Toole also introduces new writers more frequently. This means that each issue offers more diversity, and over the course of time, more and more writers will enter into the arena. The diversity contributes to the sense that the discourse is open, and public, not limited to a select group of writers who write in every issue of *Art South Africa*. To find the best solution to the debates discussed, a large pool of options must be explored.

Thirdly, one of the most effective techniques O'Toole has used to increase the criticality in the magazine is through the "themes" that are used to consolidate ideas, guide the critical discourses and thereby create a stronger and well-rounded look at a critical issue. For example, I discussed the "Painting Special Issue" in the pages above. In this issue the reader received a well-rounded and thorough analysis of painting. It is always better to have more than one perspective on a particular debate represented. This is the key element of the discourse. This allows the readers to explore many different sides of a critical issue. In phase 1 the critical texts existed as one-sided arguments, not discourses that included the aspect of conversation between two or more people.

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<sup>27</sup> However, in issue 4 of volume 4 O'Toole mentions that he is introducing a new feature, a different kind of text. Perhaps he is consciously experimenting with different kinds of texts.

O'Toole's editorials give organisation and direction to the theme topics and in this way the editorials become more than just surplus, but the vital text which draws all the others together. Though Sophie Perryer also discussed why she had chosen particular texts as important topics, the editorials seem much more effective in O'Toole's issues because they have a calculated way of weaving theory and rationale coherently, unlike phase 1, which was characterised by randomly stuck together ideas and unclear motivations.<sup>28</sup> The phase 2 editorials have a particular direction and make specific arguments for the necessity of the theme topic. O'Toole also gives readers a starting point to think about the theoretical side of the feature texts, rather than merely a description of the subjects covered, as was seen in phase 1.

O'Toole continues to provide texts on key issues, some of which are specifically related to the context of South Africa. Just as Perryer did in texts I described in the last section of chapter 3<sup>29</sup>, O'Toole does not shy away from airing contentious issues. For example, Sharlene Khan discusses race in a text entitled, "Doing it for Daddy." The subtitle describes the essay as a discussion of the "unshakable hegemony of whiteness."<sup>30</sup> In addition, the themes "Power and Influence" and "Neglect" are also placed by O'Toole into a specifically South African discourse, though they could be discussed in any country.

The three major points made in the pages above (and their subsidiary arguments) are the reasons I consider phase 2 of the magazine to be a more effective critical

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<sup>28</sup> It is not my intention to judge the editorials. For when Perryer was in charge, it was a different time in the development of *Art South Africa*; perhaps she did not have the option of themed texts, since it may have been difficult to commission the appropriate writers for the theme. O'Toole's editorials are "better" in that they are effective, but it has not been the task of this paper to pass judgments about who is a better editor/writer than whom.

<sup>29</sup> See page 46.

<sup>30</sup> V. 4, no. 3. See table of contents (page 6) for subtitle.

discourse through opening a space for dialogue and diversity. O'Toole has used his power to direct and arrange the texts so that dialogue between critics, and between critics and readers, is possible. This also allows for more opinions to be launched into the forum and debated. Comparing the two phases of *Art South Africa*, I interpret the transformation as a type of opening. Phase 1 seemed quite censored in some ways, since there was little room for a public discussion about it without the ability to send in letters or even post comments on the webpage. Through these steps taken by O'Toole, the magazine evolves into a discourse that is far better than that which was offered in phase 1.

What does all of this have to do with the greater context of the South African art world? *Art South Africa* is a major step towards an open forum in which critics can feel free to criticise artists and the art world. In chapter 3 I quoted Andrew Lamprecht who wrote that, in the South African art world, critics are afraid to speak negatively about artists because they know them personally and, they are usually so closely involved with the art economy (as artists or curators or salespeople) that they avoid “rocking the boat,” so to speak.<sup>31</sup> Yet, so many people complain about the quality of art or art criticism and do not write about it. When Kathryn Smith, art critic and artist, is asked why she writes art criticism, in an interview for the MTN *Art Talk*, Smith simply replies that she writes because no one else does (the “if you want something done you’ve got to do it yourself” attitude).<sup>32</sup> I have given many reasons for the importance of criticism, but one that I haven’t given yet is this: criticism is good for the professional relationships between critics and artists. Michael Brenson writes,

The institutionalisation of private outrage and public silence—not just regarding criticism but also with regard to so much that matters to art and

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<sup>31</sup> See the reference from Andrew Lamprecht on page 49 of chapter 3.

<sup>32</sup>Phillipa Hobbs Interview with Kathryn Smith, *MTN Art Talk*, (v. 2, no. 4) 2.



culture, including the now all-but official hostility and demonisation of the artist in America<sup>33</sup> ...has historical associations that are very disturbing to me.<sup>34</sup>

Brenson argues that the new trend in “public silence,” which he explains is not based on “mutual respect and support but on self-protectiveness and laziness”, has affected the reception and production of art negatively.<sup>35</sup> Certainly the silence of critics and their unwillingness to condemn specific artists is a sign of an incestuous system, which is of no help to artists trying to make better art and unable to understand why they are unable to sell their work. In the smaller world of South African art this is especially important.

Looking at all of the texts from *Art South Africa* I cannot find even one major text (those longer than a few hundred words) that critiques an artist specifically. Negativity is always a generality in the magazine. Critics say, “curators” generally, or “artists in South Africa” generally or “blacks” or “whites” rather than naming an artists specifically. Perhaps the next transformation in *Art South Africa* will be from generalised, non-negating criticism<sup>36</sup> to an open forum where everything may be debated . However, since the magazine is produced by a profit-seeking publisher and has commercial affiliations rather than purely academic ones, I think this is highly unlikely. At this stage in the art market the magazine will not be as commercially profitable if it loses *all* of its coffee-table-book charm.

Nonetheless, considering the things that Art South Africa has offered rather than what it has not, or not yet offered, the magazine has made an astounding impact on the

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<sup>33</sup> i.e. artists wasting valuable tax dollars, which is probably not as significant in South Africa in comparison to the millions of Rands that are wasted on corrupt officials

<sup>34</sup> Michael Brenson, “Resisting the Dangerous Journey,” 102.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>36</sup> As I have maintained, the definition of criticism does not necessarily mean that the text must negate, only that it must take a position, which can also be affirmative of an idea or a kind of non-confrontational position.

level of critical discussion about art. Even from the first issue there were critical inquiries made into the events and activities of artists. From the beginning there was the idea that trying to succeed at publishing an art magazine and failing was better than not trying at all.<sup>37</sup> Through this attempt Perryer was able to publish extremely important critical texts such “Kentrige Under Erasure,” by Ashraf Jamal<sup>38</sup> which stands out as a text that challenges inclinations to mummify the character famous artists even while they are still actively creating new art and changing. Furthermore this is usefully related to the South African context and serves as an important warning to all readers. Another example is “Painted Black” by Thembinkosi Goniwe<sup>39</sup>, who argues that the tag “black artist” supersedes the individual identity of these artists as if blackness is the most important feature of their art. Phase 1 poses these questions: how are we going to treat iconic artists? What language should we use to discuss the racial identity of an artist? These and many others previously named are immensely important issues that must be worked out in art discourse.

As argued above, phase 2 extends the effectiveness of the *Art South Africa* forum even further by adding aspects of discourse, which includes dialogue and multiple perspectives on an issue. This is a major step towards a healthy art discourse and against the exclusionary types of discourse described by Edward Said and Foucault. In the analysis above I have focused on critiques, some negative and some “neutral”, of the magazine, but I also want to emphasise that many of the features I discuss can also be seen as signs of true excellence, not just relative to the difficult circumstances of art publishing in South Africa, but compatible with the international standards for publishing

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<sup>37</sup> See Sophie Perryer’s editorial in chapter 3, page 41.

<sup>38</sup> See page 42 of chapter 3 for this text.

<sup>39</sup>Thembinkosi Goniwe, “Painted Black” (*Art South Africa*, Spring, 2003, 42-47).

excellence. The feature that I find most promising in *Art South Africa* is the willingness of the current editor, Sean O'Toole, to make constant changes to the design of the magazine. No two issues are exactly the same in their approach to the theme topics. This means that there is always the possibility of improvement (but also of decline) and that the magazine will be able to respond quickly to new needs in the community through its constant re-evaluation of what is effective and what is not. This sets an impressive standard for future art publications and other sectors of the cultural studies in South Africa.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The common theme throughout this paper and in its foundational theories has been the relationship between texts and history. The time in which a text was written affects the meaning it would have had at the time it was written; the time in which it is read, be it contemporaneous with the time it was written or many centuries later, affects the way the meaning is understood. As I have argued through reference to the theories of Janet Wolff, Edmund Cros and others, the production of texts is dependant upon the social and material conditions of the time. Another concept that runs parallel to this is the idea that ideology affects how both individuals and communities respond to texts. Though to many of the writers I discussed in the theoretical framework the term ‘ideology’ is systemically and theoretically distinct from more basic ways of understanding belief systems, like “social values,” ideology is also a way of understanding how beliefs determine the way people behave and make sense of events in the world and how they interpret texts.

The aim of this research report was to examine the characteristics of the magazine, *Art South Africa*. Because this was an “analysis” and not a description I have attempted to show not only what the characteristics are, but also why they are the way they are. What social values of this point in history have given rise to *Art South Africa*? In this paper I have chosen to examine “criticality” as a key point in the ideological stance of the editors, writers and readers of the magazine and I have shown how they act on their ideological beliefs by establishing a critical discourse in various features of the magazine. Though there are many important characteristics of *Art South Africa* that are not related to criticality, I chose to look at criticality because it seems to be an especially

important aspect of the “worldview” of some South Africans in this time and place, the beginning of democracy. I will not describe again all of the ways in which criticism is important in a free and open democratic society, since I discussed the importance of a critical attitude thoroughly in chapter 2. But recall from my discussion how criticism can guard against excess power. Criticism of the government, not just privately, but publicly, is one of the most important ways in which citizens can instigate change in a democratic system. In the same way, the promise that criticism can guard against hegemonic power also compels the arts community in South Africa to create a space where criticism can be expressed. Perhaps the makers of this magazine value diversity, dialogue, or democratic forums, while they also value quality publications with attractive images and solid binding. *Art South Africa* is not just a profit-minded magazine, it is also concerned with initiating critical discourse; this is not a small task, for it requires effort and conscientiousness.

My study is important because it proves that, though there is indeed a lack of art criticism, *Art South Africa* is filling the critical gap with its viable criticism and interest in providing a good forum for discourse. Many people have noted the distinct lack of criticism in Africa. I mentioned Salah Hassan who wrote in *Nka* that there is an “urgent need” for art criticism in Africa;<sup>1</sup> this was before the beginning of *Art South Africa*. I wonder if he would also see, as I did, how the situation has improved somewhat with *Art South Africa*’s contributions. Another person who makes reference to the lack of criticism is Kathryn Smith. In response to the interview question: “what motivated you to get involved [with art criticism]?” she said, “The lack of coverage and publishing on art

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<sup>1</sup> See page 5, footnote 7.

motivated me. Unless you write about these things they don't get historicised.<sup>2</sup>

Andrew Lamprecht writes in "Who critiques the critics?" that, "we are well acquainted with the oft-repeated complaints about the state of art criticism."<sup>3</sup> Later in the article Lamprecht points out several specific criticisms, such as the poor quality of criticism, and untrained writers.

If the analysis of these art writers is correct, there are significant inadequacies in art criticism in South Africa. But still, Lamprecht claims that art criticism is actually getting better. He writes,

Nonetheless the state of criticism is in my opinion definitely on the ascendant... (imagine a world of art criticism without *ArtThrob* and *Art South Africa*) but we are seeing a stronger body of criticism emerging, in no small way due to the two publications just mentioned.<sup>4</sup>

I agree with this statement. *Art South Africa* (and perhaps *ArtThrob* to an extent) is dedicated to criticality and takes actions to improve the art discourse with serious criticism.

The goal of this paper was to examine the art critical texts of *Art South Africa*. What I have found is that, even though there are still substandard aspects to the magazine, and even though phase 1 lacked many important elements of critical discourse, *Art South Africa* is a critical forum. I have shown that the editors, both Perryer and O'Toole, wrote specifically in the editorials about their interest in making *Art South Africa* critical.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Phillipa Hobbs Interview with Kathryn Smith. *MTN Art Talk*, (v. 2, no. 4) 2.

<sup>3</sup> Lamprecht, "Who critiques the critics?"

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Both editors discussed this in their editorials. See page 34, 41, 68-69.

In the theoretical framework I discussed some of the principles of good art discourse. To recapitulate some of the main points made in chapter 2 I will repeat a quote from Terry Eagleton; he has written,

As Habermas and Marxism recognize, in creating the material conditions in which a communication about these matters as free as possible from domination could be established, so that individuals, given full participatory access to the processes by which common meanings and values are formulated, could then select and exercise a plurality of values and styles in ways not currently available to them.<sup>6</sup>

Through *Art South Africa*'s criticality, the editors of the magazine realise several of values named in the quote. What is begun in phase 1 and then established in phase 2 is this kind of free, accessible forum in which people can gain access to a plurality of ideas. I have discussed how this happens in chapter 4. I showed that the dialogue between the general readers and the critics, or staff, was established through the letters to the editor section. This has allowed the public (readers) to critique the magazine, which empowers the readers to critique the magazine's staff's control over the content and to argue for what may improve the magazine. Additionally, I looked at how the increase in the number of writers and texts increased the readers' access to a plurality of ideas, which gives readers the ability to assess the correct points out of many opinions on a subject, rather than from only one essay from a single author, which were characteristic of phase 1 essays.

On the *Art South Africa* website Sean O'Toole is quoted in saying,

I am personally heartened by the pitch of the debate. Irrespective whether you agree with the individual contributors or not, their arguments demonstrate that this country *is* moving (too slowly, some might argue)

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<sup>6</sup> Eagleton, "Marxism and Literary Criticism." 5. See page 25, chapter 2.

towards realising, what Olu Oguibe once identified as a latent potential: 'an effervescent and vigorous critical establishment.'<sup>7</sup>

With an enthusiastic attitude such as the one displayed in this quote, I am not surprised that O'Toole does indeed make an effort to foster the critical establishment. Perhaps O'Toole's apparent role in the growth of the critical discourse through *Art South Africa* is only a matter of being in the right place at the right time. However, it is more likely that it is O'Toole, and his staff, have a genuine interest in raising the bar of critical discourse, as demonstrated by this quote, and were able to put this into practice through a revamping of the presentation techniques and formats of the magazine. In so doing, they have raised the level of the art critical discourse from a point far below standard to a point that is recognisable as a serious art discourse.

Nevertheless, *Art South Africa* has many shortcomings. Its efforts to be a critical voice are overshadowed by its efforts to be commercially successful in one obvious way: the magazine is quite expensive and always linked to a for-profit company. It is not as free as an independently published magazine, or even one that is sponsored by a university. Everything about the magazine shows that it aims to be an attractive and expensive text, as one can see even from the high-quality images and paper. If *Art South Africa* were sincerely aiming to be a critical voice would it not be best to print a magazine that is affordable for the general public? I would guess that most un-established, young artists and others interested in art would find this magazine too costly to purchase on a regular basis. At 70 Rands (approximately 10 US Dollars) per issue, the magazine costs more than many art students could make in one day at their weekend jobs.

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<sup>7</sup> Anonymous, Introduction to V. 4, no 4. Artsouthafrica.com, accessed October , 2006. No reference for the Oguibe quote is given.



Clearly this magazine does not aim to serve that section of the art community. In this way, though I have argued that *Art South Africa* is an open forum, it is best suited to the wealthy art patrons, so it is not as open as it should be or even as it sometimes reports itself to be.

My other criticism of this magazine is that the editors often allow severely substandard art writing to be printed alongside the very good texts. Though the features-section essays are almost always very good, some of the writers in the review section produce unoriginal, un-insightful texts that hardly increase the reader's understanding of the work or its contexts. Although an analysis of the quality of texts was not the goal of my research, it could be argued that one area for major improvement is the reviews section, which should be pushed to a higher level of excellence and rigor.

Though there are many other improvements that could be made, one cannot deny the increasing efforts to improve *Art South Africa*. Even external changes make a difference; for example: in phase 1 the magazine was on average 70 pages in length. In phase 2 there has been an average of 96 pages. Even though there are many advertisements filling those extra pages, there is also more text.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, *Art South Africa* is constantly revamping its format in an effort to improve its presentation. Even in the most recent issue, which is not a part of my analysis since it has only appeared on the shelves in the last few weeks, there is a completely new approach to the content, a novel theme (which is African art, rather than an exclusively South Africa focus), and a new logo on the front cover. It seems that there will be no stagnancy for *Art South Africa*.

While my research has proved that the magazine is making a difference in the critical discourse, *Art South Africa* has not been in circulation for long and its long-term

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<sup>8</sup> See appendix for a detailed chart of the number of pages devoted to advertising and texts.

history and impact is not yet known. Will it disappear before the publication of the next issue? Or will it survive for many more decades and make a history for itself? If art criticism is as necessary as I have suggested throughout this paper, I would expect that readers and writers would invest in sustaining the magazine or a similar one, but only time will tell if art critical discourse really is important *enough* to keep *Art South Africa* afloat. Just as time and place determines what kind of topics are possible in public discourse, it also determines what is possible in material terms. Today, *Art South Africa* can be printed. The social conditions in which there is a critical audience educated in a particular art discourse permit its existence and the material conditions permit its continuance. *Art South Africa* may not survive under different social and economic conditions. Surely its existence depends on free speech, a free economy, the government in power, the availability of printing material and even the acceptance of visual arts as a valuable subject for discourse.<sup>9</sup> If the social conditions necessary for *Art South Africa* continue, this magazine, I expect, will flourish with rigorous criticism and become the international standard, and longstanding benchmark for writing on South African art.

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<sup>9</sup> These may seem values that will never be taken away, within the stability of the current government, but remember that not all governments allow free speech, or accept the arts. I was recently reading in *Nature Online* magazine ([nature.org](http://nature.org), accessed November 2, 2006) about science research in Islamicist governments. Scientists are afraid to research what they like due to disapproval from their government. Contemporary art too is highly controversial in some places and may not be readily accepted in the future.

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## Appendix:

The following charts represent the content of two *Art South Africa* issues, v1, no. 2 and v3, no. 4. Section names are as used in my text. The “#page” column represents the approximate space that the text takes (not including photos) so, a .5 page text may be on a page with one other text and a small photo, while a 1 page text will only share the page space with a photo. The “critical” column marks whether or not the text takes a position. In the “SA Focus” column “no” means that the text does not consider key issues like race, history, and South African identity. If there is a South African focus I have named the issue in the column cell. The frequent “contributor” column shows whether or not the author has written many times in volume 1-4 (generally I consider a “yes” to have written texts for most of the issues and at least one feature text, “no” means that they have only written less than five texts. Moderate is somewhere in between, at my discretion. The page numbers which will help to locate the texts in the magazine are in the last column.

### Volume 1, issue 2

Section Name	Author	Title	#pages	Critical	SA Focus	Frequent Contributor	Pages
Advertising			2				0-1
Table of Contents			2				2-3
Editorial			1				4
Advertising			2				5-6
News	Nic Dawes	Going Public	1	no	no	yes-moderate	7
News	Alex Dodd	Living History	1.5	no	no	yes	8-9
News	Tracy Murinik	Smoking Gun	1	no	no	yes	10
News	Lauri Firstenburg (abroad)	Making Headlines	1	no	SA in American media	no	11
News	Kathryn Smith	Wax Lyrical	0.5	no	no	yes	12
News	Anonymous	Dial 082 for Art	0.5	no	no		12
News	Anonymous	Home and Away	1	no	no		13
Advertising							14
News	Anonymous	Outside In	0.5	no	no		15
News	Anonymous	Simply Beautiful	0.5	no	no		15
News	Sue Williamson	A Bizzare Inheritance	1.5	yes	monuments, history	yes-moderate	16-17
Advertising							18-19
Features	Ashraf Jamal	Kentridge Under Erasure	6	yes	no	yes-moderate	20-25
Features	Sean O'Toole	Comics Stripped	3	yes	SA National Style	yes	26-29
Features	Sean O'Toole	Interview	4				30-33
Features	Colin Richards	The Thought is the Thing	8	yes	National Style	no	34-41
Features	Hazel Friedman	Shooting from the Hip	6	no	no	yes-moderate	42-47
Advertising							48
Images							49
Review	Michael Goodby		2			no	50-51
Review	Kathryn Smith		2			yes	52-53
Review	Virginia MacKenny		1			yes-moderate	54
Review	Chris Roper		1			no	55
Review	Anne McIleron		1			no	56
Review	Sue Williamson		1			yes-moderate	57
Review	Alex Sudhiem		1			no	58
Review	Paul Edmunds		1			yes-moderate	59
Review	Ozioma Onuzulike		1			no	60
Review	James Sey		1			yes	61
Book Review	Ivor Powell		1			yes	62
Book Review	Emma Bedford		1			yes	63
Book Review	Andrew Lamprecht		1			yes	64
Book Review	Shaun deWaal		1			no	65
Previews			2				66-67
Advertising			1				68
Listings			3				69-71
Advertising			2				72-72





## Reading List

This is a list of contemporary art texts that were read and consulted but not used as examples in the analysis or referenced at other points in the text. Included also are important texts for future studies of South African art writing. Some of those included can found in the bibliography

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