

The original text was published in the catalogue of *Don't Mess with Mister In-Between*, 1996. I have now edited and revised the text with as light a touch as possible, attempting to only modify clumsy verbal formulation and not content, however anachronistic I might now find it.

October 2013.

## **Between the Lines**

### **The Pre-text**

In February 1995, I visited South Africa where I hadn't lived for almost twenty years. This trip had a particular purpose: to attend and write about the first Johannesburg Biennale, an event that elicited a great deal of mixed response in the local and international press. I found the quantity and quality of artistic production astonishing, and the energy of this work contagious. Once back in Portugal, I spent many fruitful hours talking through ideas generated by this Biennale with Ângela Ferreira, born in Mozambique, now resident in Lisbon, who herself had spent formative years of her life in South Africa, and who had participated in the Biennale as a practicing artist. Together, we formulated this project. We travelled to South Africa, and, in what turned out to be an extraordinarily rich and intense experience, visited and spoke to around fifty artists, from whom the selection for this exhibition was made. For the final selection, I take full responsibility.

There are, as is always the case with group exhibitions, many other possible configurations buried in this piece of research. While my aims in curating this exhibition have changed over time and with continued contact with the artists and their milieu, one thing remained constant: I was not interested in putting together a survey show of contemporary South African art. The reasons for this are diverse, and to explore them, I must return briefly to the Johannesburg Biennale. This event served

as watershed and as a symbol, in that it proclaimed the legitimation of post-apartheid South Africa within global culture. It exuberantly showcased the lifting of the cultural boycott, which in effect had taken place some four years earlier. The militant phase of the boycott had coincided with the heyday of the Black Consciousness movement in the mid 1970s. Between 1977 (the year in which Steve Biko died in police custody) and the mid 1980s, the prospect of a selective boycott was raised and often highly contested, to be finally negotiated in 1987.<sup>1</sup>

Until that time, what with censorship internally, external and internal pressure owing to the boycott, and with the devalued rand rendering travel difficult for all but the most privileged, artists living in South Africa experienced a profound sense of cultural isolation. The fact that this isolation was militated by the politics of resistance, with a categorical trade-off that the cultural boycott remain until apartheid ended, made it difficult for many artists to challenge this if they were to maintain political credibility. This is because, unlike the sporting community that was similarly affected by a boycott, most artists held liberal or progressive views. The pressure exerted by this ambience gave rise to art forms that, whatever precise position they occupied on the political spectrum, also boasted a certain local flavour. It is this pressure, and the release or partial release from it, that has allowed it to remain meaningful to talk of 'South African art.'

Indeed, over the past two years, art from South Africa has been much talked about. In 1990, before the definitive repeal of the cultural boycott, the exhibition *Art from South Africa* at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford exposed the confused and angry politics of a time of transition. After the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the release from prison of Nelson Mandela (1990), after President de Klerk's promise that apartheid would be buried by June 1991, exhibiting policy internationally cautiously began to expose South African art. Nevertheless, exhibitions were relatively

<sup>1</sup> For a succinct and elucidating discussion of the cultural boycott, see 'Sunset on Sun City,' in Rob Nixon's excellent *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture in the World Beyond*, New York: Routledge, 1994. Nixon discusses Paul Simon's polemic *Graceland* tour in this context, as well as the important *Culture in Another South Africa* conference held in Amsterdam in 1987 where the selective boycott was negotiated.

few and far between. Noteworthy exceptions were *En croce del sud* at the Venice Biennale in 1993, *Zuiderkruis* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in the same year, and *Un art contemporain d'Afrique du Sud* in Paris in 1994. Nevertheless, it is only since 1995 South African art has enjoyed what can only be called heady speculation on the international art circuit. This has led to a smattering of consternation concerning the fate of these artists once the rash of politically correct exhibition programmes targets other previously disenfranchised constituencies. One is alerted to the possibility that 'multiculturalism' might be to the 1990s what 'primitivism' had been to earlier generations: a means for wealthy, powerful nations to patronise (their) 'others,' even as they gain credibility and congratulate themselves for broad-minded inclusiveness.

Invariably, sweeping survey-shows of a single country's production move towards the tendentious and are underpinned by strong ideological programmes, private agendas and notions of unity that are usually not explicit. It seems to me that some of the more interesting group exhibitions of contemporary art today are those that are issue based, sidestepping the rhetoric of national culture. As exhibitions bearing the signature of a curator, these thematic shows of course become fraught with other problems; but the articulation of such authorship legitimises a subjectivity of viewpoint in ways that apparently neutral surveys, with their invisible omniscient narrators, cannot do.

Having said this, I do believe that, within the context of what has been termed global culture — with waves of information moving across boundaries in endless exchange and transit — there exist local variants predicated upon the specificities of particular contexts, whether material or conceptual. Aware that to embark on an exhibition of 'the art of South Africa' is to step into a minefield, I have, instead, selected the qualifying rubric of 'fifteen artists from South Africa' in order to underline the notion of individuality within a shared framework. I believe that to exhibit art that deals the dismantling of what might broadly be termed colonialism is timely in Portugal, where, at the time of writing, there is no significantly available visual culture dedicated to the complex cultural ramifications of Portugal's own decolonisation. I hope to tiptoe through the minefield by the choice of a purposefully ambiguous title setting the tone for this exhibition. This title itself — 'Don't Mess with Mister In-between' — is a line

from a song by Johnny Mercer ('Ac-cen-tu-ate the Positive') and is cited at the outset of Homi Bhabha's influential book *The Location of Culture*, an impassioned argument for those interstitial spaces that characterise the dismantling of binary positions that characterise post-Enlightenment, Cartesian thinking.

The exploration of in-between spaces has also provided a means of negotiating the tricky business of terminology. The legacy of the terminological codes from the apartheid era admonishes us against too easily heralding the immediate death of apartheid, particularly in view of the immense discrepancies in wealth, education and land ownership that have remained in its wake. Within a fractured society – a society marked by a multiplicity of ethnicities and cultures, of identities and narratives of origin – artistic production has been subject to the strains that pull political discourses in every direction. Terminology continues to be contested. Terms such as 'transitional', 'assimilation', 'dialogue', 'contact and exchange', 'acculturation' 'unity in diversity' and even 'pluralism' bear witness to the urgency with which issues of interaction have been addressed.<sup>2</sup> The distinction, for instance, between arts and crafts remains a vexed one. This is similarly the case with questions around whose mandate authorises one cultural group to exhibit the material vestiges and artefacts of another, or narrate its history.<sup>3</sup> Within this context, a terminological map of South African art of the last twenty years has been re-drawn many times. Definitions overlap, subsume or contradict one another. Such supposedly descriptive terms as 'traditional art', 'township art', or the more problematic 'transitional objects'<sup>4</sup> have created a

<sup>2</sup> See Colin Richards' illuminating discussion of terminology in South Africa in 'Desperately Seeking 'Africa'', in the catalogue *Art from South Africa*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1990, pp. 35 - 44.

<sup>3</sup> This was a frequently debated issue around the exhibition *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen*, curated by Pippa Skotnes at the South African National Gallery this year, dealing with the representation of the Khoisan people.

<sup>4</sup> Colin Richards, *ibid.* p 37, discusses how the 'transitional' concept is part of the cultural lexicon in South Africa. It was given dramatic expression in the exhibition *Tributaries* curated by Ricky Burnett in 1985. The polemic term 'transitional' referred to work that looked at once 'African' and 'modern'. As Gavin Younge has noted, when 'transitional' objects 'appeared' in the mid 80s, they only 'looked new in the context of an art market which insisted on its metropolitan primacy' — see Gavin Younge, *Art of the South African Townships*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1988.

conceptual grid through which some of the diversified visual and cultural products of South Africa have been encoded and understood.

Any curator faced with this vast and sometimes confusing plethora of data, must come to a decision concerning an exhibiting strategy. David Elliott, no doubt under some pressure (this was, after all, 1990) decided that the exhibition *Art from South Africa* that he curated for the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford 'should reflect the whole range of contemporary visual culture; crafts ... as well as fine-art.'<sup>5</sup> Today, exhibitions tend to be a little less encompassing, but even now, this is not always the case. Together with Ângela Ferreira, my decision has been not to act as a tourist within an implicitly exotic (or 'authentic') terrain, but to remain firmly within the limits defined by western traditions, by contemporary art discourse. All the work chosen, therefore, falls within the parameters of western artistic criteria. Since these criteria are both wittingly and unconsciously native to me, I have decided to take them on board in a self-conscious way. I hope, therefore, that this selection bears no trace of a search for either origins or an exotic Other. It is the fruit of my attempt to explore the complexity and diversity of the works of particular artists, and the affinities and dissonances between them.

### **The Text**

In 1989, Albie Sachs wrote a paper entitled 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom' for an in-house ANC discussion. This paper reached South Africa through its publication in the newspaper *The Weekly Mail* in February, 1990, and provoked a storm of debate. In it, Sachs overturned the prevailing ANC orthodoxy that viewed culture as a 'weapon of the struggle'. 'Can we say', Sachs asks, 'that we have begun to grasp the full dimensions of the new country and new people that is struggling to give birth to itself,

<sup>5</sup> David Elliott, 'Babel in South Africa', in the catalogue *Art from South Africa*, op cit. pp 25-27.

or are we still trapped in the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination?’<sup>6</sup> Sachs correctly points to the fact that an art that sets itself up as an instrument of political struggle has to be, above all, unambiguous (‘a gun is a gun is a gun, and if it were full of contradictions, it would fire in all sorts of directions and be useless for its purpose’). He observes how this propagandistic notion prioritises content over form. He notes, contrariwise, that ‘the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions.’ An art for the struggle is not, in these simple (some might say simplistic) terms, art.

Although no doubt Sachs' words would have been different had he been addressing another, possibly hostile, audience, his call for the abandonment of the notion of ‘culture as a weapon of the struggle’ is indicative of the complexity of South African attitudes to cultural production at the time. That same year, the South African artist Sue Williamson published her book *Resistance Art in South Africa*. Williamson chronicles the effects of the culture of anti-apartheid on the recent work of artists in South Africa, and calls attention to several important events that articulated the emergent attitudes: two conferences, and the exhibition *The Neglected Tradition*, curated by Steven Sack. This show was held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1988, and astonishingly, it was ‘the first time ever a large-scale retrospective show of work by black artists had been held in one of the country's leading art galleries.’<sup>7</sup> In the two conferences — *The State of Art in South Africa* held in Cape Town in 1979<sup>8</sup> and *Art Towards Social Development and Change in South Africa* held in Gaborone, Botswana in 1982 — the significance of an art of political commitment was underlined, as well as the necessity of encouraging the integration of ‘cultural workers’ and their communities.

<sup>6</sup> Albie Sachs' paper ‘Preparing Ourselves for Freedom’, along with some of the responses to it provoked, has been published in *Spring is Rebellious*, edited by Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press, Cape Town, Buchu books, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Sue Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa*, Claremont, (South Africa): David Philip, 1989; p10.

<sup>8</sup> The conference was, as Colin Richards points out, ‘itself subject to the effects of cultural struggle, being boycotted or ignored by many black cultural workers’, op. cit. p36.

The emergence of a mainstream art of resistance in South Africa dates to the mid-1970s and coincides with the Soweto uprising and the most trenchant phase of the Black Consciousness movement. 'Before 1976,' writes Sue Williamson, 'a trip round South African art galleries would have given very little clue to the socio-political problems of the country. Strangely divorced from reality, landscapes, experiments in abstraction, figure studies, and vignettes of township life hung on the walls.'<sup>9</sup> It was only after the Soweto uprisings, in the late 1970s and in the 1980s that curators like Lorna Ferguson, Marilyn Martin, Ricky Burnett and Steven Sack made concerted efforts to incorporate the work of heterogeneous cultural groups within official institutional spaces. By the same token, until the late 1970s, art education at the white universities<sup>10</sup> was based on de-contextualised formalist/modernist aesthetics borrowed from Europe and the USA. (It is not by chance that Kendell Geers mentions in his curriculum vita the visit to South Africa, in 1975, of Clement Greenberg, the American pope of formalism).

The Soweto Riots in June of 1976, beginning with a march on Orlando Stadium in Soweto by 15,000 schoolchildren, the defacement of exercise books and the boycotting of lessons, was a symbolic acting out of despair and rage with regard to the imposed values of Bantu Education. This event served as a signpost on the cultural horizon. 'After Soweto', writes Anne McClintock, 'new forms of artistic creation appeared across the country [...] giving rise to an unusually intense debate on the nature of aesthetic value and its relation to what might broadly be termed politics.'<sup>11</sup> It is to this debate that Albie Sachs' paper addresses itself; and to the fact that after Soweto, it became impossible to maintain credibility within art communities in South Africa if one did not in some way acknowledge the political struggle or the violent

<sup>9</sup> Sue Williamson, op cit. p8.

<sup>10</sup> Segregated education was an integral part of the apartheid system. By the Bantu Education Act of 1953, Black education was taken from provincial and largely English control and placed in the hands of the National Department of Native Affairs. The Extension of University Education Act of 1959 paved the way for the so-called 'non-white' universities.

<sup>11</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, New York: Routledge, 1995, p330.

realities of local life. Concomitantly, and more problematically, the wholesale borrowing of European and American artistic genres began was now seriously examined: the question of 'which tradition/s am I working in?' became a crucial one.

Such *engagé* positions, particularly in the work of those artists whose work kept alive a European legacy, has parallels with the art of the Dada phase in Europe during and after World War I, where it was proclaimed that 'the highest art will be that which represents the multiple problems of the epoch [...] the best and the newest artists will be those who every hour recover the shreds of their bodies from the frenzied cataract of life.'<sup>12</sup> As a European phenomenon, Dada displayed anarchic rebelliousness through a total re-organisation of inherited aesthetic norms — in typography, photomontage, pictorial composition, theatre, poetry — rather than in any programmatic, or illustrative, reductionism ('a gun is a gun is a gun'.)

Formally, however, much of the critical work produced in South Africa through the 1970's and 1980's was more akin to German art of the Weimar Republic, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (The New Objectivity) artists of the 1920's, where the barbs of criticism were shaped by content — caricature, satire, or some form of realism — rather than through form. It was only in the 1980s that there emerged in South Africa critical idioms that melded local content and an acknowledgment (at times appropriative) of traditional art forms within the more conceptual framework offered by contemporary European and American art discourse. Even then, these works were produced within disavowed or silenced ethnic and even gender divisions (Andries Botha, Marc Edwards, Kendell Geers, Michael Goldberg, Joachim Schoenfeld, Jeremy Wafer, Gavin Younge).

Coinciding with the 'long walk to freedom,' the past few years have witnessed a blurring of the previously entrenched categorical positions defining the relationship between aesthetics and politics: those positions that are the vestiges and reminders of what Albie Sachs calls 'the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination.' It is not by chance that one of the themes of the first Johannesburg Biennale was 'Decolonising our Minds.' The multiple ghettos of the imagination hold to a notion of separatism

<sup>12</sup> Richard Heulsenbeck, *First German Dada Manifesto*, April 1918



that is often disguised or disavowed, for instance in women-only or blacks-only shows. A similar mechanism operates in the expectation that the work of African artists maintain its 'ethnic' guise. Such positions have led to the vexed and much theorised relationships between the indigenous or local and the global, or the traditional and the contemporary. The exhibition *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* held at the Whitechapel Gallery in London as part of the Africa '95 festival, is an example of just how much confusion can reign when these issues are aired. As late as 1993, the South African artist David Koloane put it tersely thus: 'It is curious how a readily 'ethnic' concept as promoted by the government has conveniently become an appropriate aesthetic classification. A parallel can be drawn between the somewhat hollow ring around the legitimisation of the Bantustan policy and the false echo of an 'African' mythology in 'ethnic' expression [...] The irony is that it is only Black artists, who constitute the indigenous population, who are insistently reminded at every possible occasion about their identity, and how they should be conscious of it, by specialists who are descendants of settlers.'<sup>13</sup>

Today, there is a shift played out not only against the backdrop of South Africa's changing politics, but also against that of the global collapse of utopias, the collapse of both capitalist and communist teleologies of progress. With the demise of the Eastern bloc, South Africans have had to 'adjust to the loss of a principal paradigm for rationalising apartheid and a principal paradigm for opposing it.'<sup>14</sup> More broadly, the collapse of a project that found its most optimistic articulation in the Enlightenment ideal, expresses a crisis in modernist epistemology. The myth of progress (and its hidden other, degeneration) found voice in the Enlightenment faith in the self-determination of various grand narratives, predicated on areas of specialised

<sup>13</sup> David Koloane, 'The Identity Question: Focus on Black South African Expression', *Third Text, Africa: Special Issue*, no. 23, 1993. In a fascinating article about the artist Ouattarat, Olu Oguibe speaks of the expectations and the 'confines of perception within which 'African artists are either constructed or called upon to construct themselves' and its relation to the 'discourse of power and confinement in current western appreciation of modern African art.' See: Olu Oguibe, 'Art, Identity, Boundaries', in *NKA — Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Fall/winter 1995, p26.

<sup>14</sup> Rob Nixon, op.cit, p7.

knowledge and expertise. The collapse of the progress myth is summed up in the prefix 'post' that has been appended to a dazzling array of concepts and that points to an apocalyptic, *fin de siècle* (or millennial) notion of time and of history. We live in a time that we designate as a threshold — post-Holocaust, post-apartheid, post-industrial, post-feminist, post-structural, post-modern, post-colonial.<sup>15</sup> Terms such as 'post-historical' (Fukuyama), 'post-conventional identity' (Habermas), 'post-human' or 'post-genital sexuality' locate questions of self-definition always in a space beyond. It is surely an ironic symptom of the notion of progress itself that the 'other side' of the divide know no other designation, that it should remain knowable only by a prefix determined by the linear logic of progress. It is on this trope that Homi Bhabha constructs his theory of an interstitial space, a space 'in-between', where tradition and innovation are no longer two mutually opposed terms along a temporal continuum, but rather, exist as 'moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences.'<sup>16</sup>

It is through these processes that Bhabha articulates the notion of the *invention* of tradition, alongside his idea of nationhood as a narrative. These processes of narration and invention eschew the notion of an 'original' core identity. Here is how, in a succinct paragraph in his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha defines what happens:

The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress.

<sup>15</sup> For some interesting discussions on the relationship between post-modernism and post-colonialism, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, New York and London: Routledge, 1990; Kwame Appiah, *In my Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, London; Methuen, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, op cit. p1.

Bhabha's in-between space is a dialectical hinge, but it is also a point from which a view might be taken, a borderline point of view that leaves behind the monolithic and mutually exclusive categories of Cartesian thinking. This perspective affords a view where 'social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition; they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project — at once a vision and a construction.'<sup>17</sup> With this elastic model, Bhabha also casts a passing glance at the intersecting vectors articulating particular forms of difference, those racial and sexual terms whereby colonial desire is constructed.<sup>18</sup>

Bhabha's brilliant analysis provides a lens through which it is useful to observe the cultural production of South Africa today; a theoretical framework through which the confusing rhetorical claims of 'national unity', 'synthetic cultures', 'unity in diversity', 'hybridism' 'pluralism' (and so forth) might begin to be accommodated, or juggled into new and perhaps more complex configurations. In more general terms too, the notion of border-crossing de-stabilises the most sanctified divisions, say between life and death, or between masculine and feminine. In the South African context, it is perhaps against this interstitial position that the notion of post-modernism might gain greater coherence. For there, as in other countries where there is political strife, the cynicism and pastiche that characterised much work produced under the banner of post-modernism (say in New York in the 1980's) would be an unaffordable luxury. (By the same token, the adoption of 'post-modernism' as a *style* in Portugal in the 1980s, had a profoundly corrosive effect on a potentially organic relationship that might have evolved between social and political realities and the visual arts.) Furthermore, in South Africa, there is now great pressure to construct and narrate a present moment

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp 2-3.

<sup>18</sup> Bhabha has been criticised, for instance by Anne McClintock, *op. cit.*, for shrugging off the gender part of the equation in his discussions on difference; the question of the crossing over of race and gender, in the notion of 'colonial desire', is addressed by McClintock, *op. cit.*, and by Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, New York, Routledge, 1995. Both Young and McClintock have excellent bibliographies on the topic; I refer the reader only to the classic text by Franz Fanon, *Peaux Noire, Masques Blancs*, Paris: Editions Seuil, 1952.

that might serve as a beacon of cultural survival: it is this organic process of the construction of the present that is, perhaps, the most dynamic and prevalent sense that contemporary South African art communicates.

Before providing a brief guide to the work of the artists in this exhibition, I want to turn to the question of post-modernism specifically in the context of the collective engagement in 'truth and reconciliation' that marks the present moment in South Africa. The name of a commission of inquiry that began its hearings in April of this year into crimes committed by the apartheid regime,<sup>19</sup> the term 'truth and reconciliation' has become shorthand for the need to mourn and memorialise: for those acts of anamnesis (the recalling to memory of things past, or of the unacceptable repressed material of the psyche) that permit the invention of a future. The question of anamnesis, a function of the work of mourning, has often been raised in relation to post-war German culture; it is perhaps not inappropriate to raise it here.

It is only apparently paradoxical that the rhetoric of Nazi eugenics should trace its lineage to the Enlightenment. It was under the sign of natural history that there arose the Enlightenment classification of human types. After the advent of social Darwinism in the mid nineteenth century, the image of the 'family of man'<sup>20</sup> outlined the narrative of an evolutionary family through which historical progress was naturalised

<sup>19</sup> The Truth Commission, couched in the language of religious confession, is not in the mould of the Nuremberg war crime trials. In effect these are not trials at all, but an opportunity for victims of apartheid brutality and their families to tell their tragic stories; and for perpetrators of police and other violence to receive indemnity through confession. For this reason, the commission has been highly polemical. The hearings have given rise to a wave of grief and the need to narrate and re-iterate that are part of the work of mourning. An exhibition, an academic conference, literary readings and other cultural events dedicated to 'truth and reconciliation' took place in Cape Town in June/July of this year. Under the general title *Faultlines*, the events were organised and curated by Jane Taylor, and timed to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Soweto uprisings, as well as the start of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings.

<sup>20</sup> The relationship between the concepts around 'the family of man' and the prejudices on which 'the science of race' has been constructed have been much discussed in recent years; see Anne McClintock, op. cit.; Robert J.C. Young, op.cit.; Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985; Sander Gilman (ed.) *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985 — among many others.

and history was figured as familial. This had two important outcomes, one pertaining to gender and the other to race. In this narrative, women as historical agents are relegated to the realm of nature: they are the vessels through which continuity is safeguarded. Gender inferiority was compared to its racial cognate through the evocation of the so-called 'degenerate classes'. Figured as atavistic reminders of a primitive past — the Darwinian counterpart to God's stepchildren — these were a corruption of the universal quintessence of Enlightenment humanism. (In the work of Lien Botha and Raymond Smith, of Penny Siopis and of Santu Mofokeng, we see critiques of these constructs)

From the founding narrative of degeneration by miscegenation, a direct line can be traced to Nazi eugenics. Nature's rule, Hitler tells us in *Mein Kampf*, consists of 'the inner segregation of the species of all living beings on this earth'.<sup>21</sup> J.M. Coetzee rightly points out that after the Nuremberg war crime trials in 1945, the language of 'blood, taint, flaw and degeneration' that, for two centuries, had passed for scientific terms, could no longer be legitimately employed. The trials in Germany established a linguistic and conceptual repression of terms, to the extent that in South Africa, where a party, elected to office in 1948, used as its model the legislation of Nazi Germany, 'political prudence dictated that the rationale for race classification, race separation and race dominance should not be couched in terms of eugenics and biological destiny.'<sup>22</sup> However, the hysterical rhetoric of fear of contagion is implicit in the legislations passed by the National Party in South Africa in the late 1940s and through the 1950s,<sup>23</sup> and points to the continued belief in the purity of blood and race, and the superiority of the European. 'The same but different', 'separate development'.

<sup>21</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, cited by Robert J.C. Young, op.cit, p 8. Young provides an interesting historical analysis of the notion of miscegenation.

<sup>22</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1988; p137.

<sup>23</sup> Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, 1949; Population Registration Act, Immorality Act and Group Areas Act, all of 1950; Bantu Education Act, 1953, and so on.

I have tried briefly to outline how the notion of purity of race was constructed as a logical counterpart to the purity of disciplines in Enlightenment epistemology (and, subsequently in the project of modernity); such purity denotes the clean division between cordoned off areas of knowledge, no messin' with Mister In-between. It is in the critique of such concepts of purity that the discourses of post-modernity and post-colonialism intersect. Here is Jean-François Lyotard, one of the early exponents the of post-modernism as a conceptual construct. He is talking about the importance of *remembering* in the context of the various failures of the project of modernity: 'All these wounds can be given names,' he tells us.

Their names are strewn across the field of our unconscious like so many secret obstacles to the quiet perpetuation of the modern project. Under the pretence of safeguarding that project, the men and women of my generation in Germany imposed on their children a forty-year silence about the 'Nazi interlude'. This interdiction against anamnesis stands as a symbol for the entire western world. Anamnesis constitutes a painful process of working through, a work of mourning for the attachments and conflicting emotions, loves and terrors associated with those names...<sup>24</sup>

Anamnesis, then, is equated to giving terror a name. In his inspired study, *Stranded Objects: Mourning Memory and Film in Postwar Germany*, Eric Santner claims that post-modern critical discourses represent a kind of translation into global terms of Adorno's dictum that after Auschwitz, poetry is no longer possible. 'After Auschwitz' Santner notes, 'after this trauma to European modernity, critical theory becomes in large part an ongoing elaboration of a seemingly endless series of 'no longer possibles'.<sup>25</sup> While Lyotard posits the start of post-modernity at the end of the 'forty-year silence,' for Santner, it is the Nuremberg trials that put an end to the optimistic

<sup>24</sup> Jean François Lyotard, 'Ticket to a New Decor', in *Copyright 1*, 1987; cited by Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990; p.8

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p 8-9.

project of modernity, and hence for him, implicitly, the post-modern age begins not in the 1980s, but in the 1940s: it has its ultimate staging in Auschwitz.

The 'no longer possibles' of which Santner talks are all articulations of modes of aesthetic and political thinking and practice underlined by a response to the 'inability to tolerate difference, heterogeneity, non-mastery.' Santner's argument is that the discursive practices that suppress heterogeneity and difference in favour of purity and homogeneity are founded on an inability to engage in 'those acts of mourning which institute difference on the ruins of (infantile) fantasies of omnipotence.' On the register of the aesthetic, the discourse of the uncontaminated self-determination and purity of forms equates formalism with authoritarianism: both imply the policing of boundaries. With the breakdown of the Enlightenment/Modernist project of progress and of homogeneous sources of legitimation, the post-modern consciousness has – if it has done nothing else – been called upon to integrate notions of multiplicity and heterogeneity.

If western culture suffered from amnesia after the World War II, this owed itself to (or perhaps expressed itself as the inability to find a suitable language — a symbolic register — in and through which to articulate the unspeakable, and hence an inability to construct an appropriate memorial. Bruno Bettelheim describes his inability, upon returning to visit the concentration camp of Dachau, to feel the 'appropriate' emotions. The lesson he draws from this is twofold: firstly, 'that one cannot dedicate monuments to the depravity of a system by tending carefully the graves of its victims.' And secondly, 'that I could best preserve it [Dachau] in my mind.'<sup>26</sup> These issues remain highly contested. Yet Bettelheim points to something important. By being re-located in a mental space, on a symbolic register, the memorial becomes a way of *thinking* loss, or tragedy, or dispossession.

In South Africa today, it is by working on the cusp between divisive given categories (the political arena and the domestic space; landscape and city; public and private domains; history and family; mourning and celebration), that many artists are

<sup>26</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *Recollections and Reflections*, London: Penguin Books, 1990 (1956), p240.

expressing this readiness to confront the ambivalence and anxiety that signal the work of mourning and repair.



## The Artists/The Works

### Willem Boshoff — *Blind Alphabet ABC*

Willem Boshoff is an obsessive collector of words: his work deals with books, dictionaries, definitions, cryptic typographies, specialised terminologies, translations. The intricate conceptual articulation of his long-term projects is allied to a sensual physicality and highly polished craftsmanship. There is a political dimension to Boshoff's driven concern with language: it lies in the fact that the acquisition of language is directly linked to empowerment. This is implicit not only in projects dealing with the eleven official languages in South Africa, but also in the suggestion in all his work, that the holder of the secrets of language is a wielder of very particular forms of knowledge. By extension, the act of translation, say from one language to another, or from tactile to visual registers, is an act of bridge-building in which the agent is empowered as a mediator.

Harnessing his insomnia to an implacable need to work, Boshoff plays on the dim edge which separates dark from light: meaning from nonsense. The works themselves are at once rebuses and obstacles. They play on the twinned meaning generated by two mythological figures, both named Hermes: hermeneutic, and hermetic, the one providing access to meaning, the other occluding it.

*Blind Alphabet ABC* is a complex project aimed, in the artist's words, to 'redress the place of blindness as an unfortunate metaphor for ineptitude and ignorance.'<sup>27</sup> Boshoff has created a morphological alphabet accessible only to the blind: in an inversion of roles, it is the blind that act as mediators for the sighted. The work thus

<sup>27</sup> Willem Boshoff, *Blind Alphabet ABC: Manual for Exhibition Officers*, The words in the present project are taken from the artist's *Post-modern dictionary for the Blind*, which the artist is using in preparation for a work titled *Blind Wall*. This wall, we are told in the manual, 'will consist of the most abstruse and, in a sense, the blindness of words and their definitions, formed into the bricks of an unassailable obstruction, both in concept and reality, built across the exhibition halls of an art gallery.'

enables sighted visitors to benefit from the touching and reading skills of blind guides. First (in 1991-2), the artist collected words whose meaning was exclusively morphological; in 1993 he began sculpting each word into descriptive forms in wood. These carvings were executed at the pace of one a day; the 338 sculptures, correspond to the letters A,B and C. The sculptures are hidden from view by their placement in boxes where gallery rules prevent sighted people from opening them. An aluminium Braille plaque covering each box provides a verbal essay on the morphological term.

On show here are 45 words, corresponding to section of the letter B (*babery* to *biparous*). The units are placed closely in a disposition that the artist compares to a cemetery, disorienting for the sighted but providing easy and reassuring access to the blind, who can only read one form at a time. The blind 'enlighten' the sighted by translating the Braille text: 'by their special magic they dictate the most abstract texts through their fingertips.'

### **Lien Botha and Raymond Smith — *Krotoa's Room*.**

Translation is also a central metaphor in the work of Lien Botha and Raymond Smith, her architect husband. The project began with Smith's design of utility furniture. Low-cost and easy to construct using readily available materials and simple mounting instructions, it addresses serious social issues in a context where housing is such a great problem in South Africa. Around this furniture, a dialogue with Lien Botha began, and a narrative constructed. Like Smith, Botha uses readily available and recycled materials.

Krotoa was a Khoi woman who was employed as a translator at the household of the Dutch settler, Jan van Riebeeck. Acting as a bridge between the local Khoi people and the Dutch, she adopted western dress, was baptised and embraced the traditions of the church, marrying a Danish immigrant. When her husband died and when the Van Riebeeck household left, she is said to have turned to drink and prostitution. Lore has it that she was exiled to Robben Island, which already in the 17th century was a geographical articulation for the status of pariah or outcast. Botha's photomontages

play on the superimposed meanings of coloniser and colonised, settler and dispossessed. The animal-like physiognomies that result from the superimposition of the faces of Krotoa with that of Maria van Riebeeck, suggest that there is no necessary or essential bond of womanhood linking them, but rather, that race and class divide them.

Botha and Smith show Krotoa to be doubly marginalised, on grounds of both ethnicity and gender (it is after her husband dies that her legitimised relation to western culture is severed). The mythology around the Khoi peoples (they are represented as dumb, brutish, idle and uncivilised) is undone here through a votive sense of solemnity and also by the ironic use of Afrikaans words printed on boxes on the leaning bookshelf. The irony is emphatic when we remember that Afrikaans, the language of the settlers, only achieved legal recognition in 1918 from a redesigned and purged *Hotnotstaal* (Hottentot language). The punning of these compound words that Botha employs is not properly translatable, but the literal meanings of some of the words are: *genadebrood* — bread of charity; *geslag* — slaughter or gender; *skipbreuk* — shipwreck; *volksbesit* — heritage; *goedkoop* — cheap; *verplaasbaar* — removable; *plaaslik* (local — a 'plaas' both a place and a farm); *tafelgebed* — grace.

### **Lisa Brice – *Safe Home***

The double marginalisation of black women is also a concern in the work of Lisa Brice. The pieces shown here were part of a larger installation entitled *Make your Home your Castle*, shown at the Castle in Cape Town in 1995 in the exhibition *Scurvy — The Secret Seven*. (The Castle was the bastion of apartheid value and was later used as a highly charged exhibiting space.) Brice's work in the early 1990's had dealt with the stereotyping of women's bodies in sexual fetishism and pornography. The present work extended the critique to the particular role and representation of women in South Africa. Casting an ironic glance at the traditionally homely role of the *volksmother* (the mother of the people) under a plaque — 'what is a home without an armed mother? — it reiterates the race and gender division that cleaves South African

society, relegating domestic labour to black women, the split destinies of 'maids and madams.' The suggestion of domestic order in the pieces on show — neatly ranged armchair and coffee tables, embroidered pillows, little vignettes — are all indices of female labour.

The metal grid of which the furniture cut-out is made, the window bars, the warning signs on the floor-mat and embroidered on the pillowcases, are reminders of the extent to which the 'safe home' has become a prison. In the context of the police state, the term 'security' is more threatening than reassuring: we are reminded too of the safe houses that gave protection to political activists. In the two-dimensional use of metal, as if drawing with it, Brice splices together the clean-cut lines of Pop Art with the familiar forms of local safety bars, while also alluding to the vernacular forms of wire toy-making.

### **Marc Edwards: Learning History**

The gerundive form of the verb — learning — in that trick performed by the English language, makes for a neat paradox: are we learning history, or is this the history of learning? The word "float" is buoyed up on the wall and, with the inevitable suggestion of "floating signifiers", reminds us that this learning project can only be open-ended.

Death we know, is un-representable. In this austere installation, one is reminded of crowd scenes — football matches, uprisings of the discontent, police brutality: the appearance of blanket-shrouded figures is never good news. There is a physicality and a haunting presence about these four figures, made representable by being hidden. They hover uneasily above the ground. In Nadine Gordimer's novel *The Conservationist*, a black corpse keeps floating up out of the earth; "float" here is the signifier which points to the insistence of death in the history lesson. It will not disappear.

The soccer ball which makes the "O" of "FLOAT" is itself a floating object, alluding also to the sports euphoria in South Africa, and the obsession on a national level, with such

"brutal rites of passage into manliness"<sup>28</sup> as sports and military conscription. In South Africa, segregated sports expressed the omnipresent anxiety about the body and its boundaries; while the militarisation of male sports and rituals of male bonding legitimised forms of same-sex contact otherwise scorned by a culture of machismo.

The figures painted on the wall in ferric nitrate on the wall are derived from elongated projections of cave painting, introducing a touch of lyricism and another temporal dimension to the work. Ferric nitrate (rust) is traditionally associated with the patina on bronze sculpture: and it is patina which ostensibly narrates the history of the sculpture. Here, ferric nitrate is removed from its covering role, to become an autonomous but metamorphosing material (when it is painted onto the wall, it is transparent), a suspended sign of change through time.

### **Kendell Geers – *Title withheld***

Kendell Geers sees the pleasure principle governing the production of aesthetic objects as a form of hedonism; his aim is to keep the pleasure principle in check by the introduction of the reality principle. Geers' conceptual choices are governed by criteria that emphasise the fusion of aesthetics with ethics: without the latter, the former becomes mere dilettantism. His critique of South African politics often takes the form of a play on self-congratulating, legitimising schemes (news items, quota systems, affirmative action). *Title withheld (Score)* is an ironic take on the absurd arithmetic of hidden quota agendas present in many South African cultural events; while his Curriculum Vitae, a droll narrative of the self-as-anti-hero, seems to be a paraphrasing of the pessimism and despair implicit in the title of Bloke Modisane's book *Blame me on history*. The work served as the logo for and emblem of the exhibition.

### **William Kentridge — *Colonial Landscapes***

<sup>28</sup> Rob Nixon, op.cit. p 136.

William Kentridge's work in animated film and theatre has explored an analogy between the anatomical body and the body politic. This analogy is played out against a landscape that is also a boundary: the Johannesburg city limits with mine tips, drive-in screens (a nostalgic anachronism) and scrap yards: the waste products that exist at the limit of the urban body. The six *Colonial Landscapes* exhibited here are unusual in his oeuvre: no longer the city's edges, they are uninhabited landscapes, prospects where the human narrative is implicit rather than determining. Deriving from some of the drawn landscapes in the artist's production of *Faustus in Africa* these drawings allude to the printed images of Africa prevalent in 19th and early 20th century typographic landscapes in picture books such as *Boys' Own*: English children's books of what the colonies looked like.

If the initial images on which these drawings are based were already steeped in ideology — the distance of viewing point suggesting the notion of prospection and surveillance while maintaining intact European conventions of landscape representation — Kentridge's images are several times mediated. Their discreet irony resides in this mediation. The vignetting of the images adds a further nostalgic suggestion of re-presentation. And if the sensual, sooty, velvety markings of charcoal on paper are analogies for the graphic marks of the source-etchings, the red crosses on the surface suggest an alien space: the point from which the survey is taken and marked up for imperial knowledge. This suggestion of measuring and taking stock not only suggests the distance between the scene and its viewer, but also figures the landscape as targeted.

### **Terry Kurgan - *Untitled***

The babies are all female. Incisively drawn in graphite/charcoal, with an occasional flush of coloured pastel (blue or, more frequently, red/pink), they float in space, exerting a remarkable presence and physicality. In a body of work characterised by the idea of repetition and similarity, it is the small changes that make a difference: alterations in scale indicate proximity or distance; bodily and facial inflections a state of

alertness or withdrawal. The pink babies look robust; those dusted in blue suggest underline the fragile and liminal state of babyhood — alive but only just, or, as the artist puts it, ‘the way newborns look, between being and not being.’

Within this state of liminality, femininity too is represented as a violable threshold. One becomes scarily aware of the baby's sex, swollen and vulnerable: it underlines not only what we already know, since Freud, about the sexuality of infants, but also the projected potential for all those other states of transition that befall the female body, and that find their locus in that zone: pleasure, danger, menstruation, birth, menopause. The rounded presence of these baby girls, allied to their extreme vulnerability, underlines the extent to which unspoken loss is written into family relationships: each moment of embrace is also steeped in the threat of its own passing. The impulse to record the presence of this baby — the artist's daughter — is like the impulse to make family albums, simultaneously puncturing and holding time.

### **Moshekwa Langa - *Untitled***

Akin to artists such as Kcho or Jimmie Durham, Moshekwa Langa uses the principles of collage and bricolage, not only as constructive metaphors of cultural fusion, but also as a form of disruption. He interrupts any fluid re-construction of handed-down narratives and simple stories (of progress, of material uniformity, of singular origins). There is a roughness and disdain for aesthetic hierarchies in the way Langa's pieces are put together, suggesting an urgent and expedient use of anything that is to hand: books and maps, sticks and stones, debris and documents. These items allow potentially disparate social and physical worlds to conflate in ways that underline flexibility and contingency, an approach that the artist associates with his own ‘oscillating between groups.’ ‘I'm not really sure that one's identity is something one can possess,’ he has observed.

The prioritisation of process grants Langa's work its ephemeral and alluringly incidental appearance. These pieces hold meaning at arm's length, remaining stubbornly untitled, but heavy with latent meaning. In *No title (skins)*, the cement bags hanging on washing

lines are violent reminders of flayed skins. There is similar aggression in the wrapped and sealed telephone directories attached to metal clothes hangers. The slimness of the directories reveals their origin to be from small and implicitly remote places. The wrapping tape and black plastic that occlude these books from both sight and touch, function as succinct visual metaphors for the censorship practiced during the apartheid regime. As in Gavin Younge's work on this show, the idea of covering up an object serves, paradoxically, to reveal more about its content: 'if you're trying to keep secrets away, they have a way of becoming more visible,' Langa has observed.

### **Pat Mautloa - *Untitled***

The impetus behind Pat Mautloa's work is a response to found materials — in this he is akin to Moshekwa Langa. However, Mautloa's works perform a more literal narrative. The found materials register the physical and geographic dislocation from one part of the city to another, from home to studio (and the transit from 'black' to 'white' urban areas). Mautloa's earlier assemblages in metal incorporated a more direct allusion to the material vestiges of the violence of urban life in South Africa (scarred and battered surfaces, corroded edges, bullet holes). The present work nevertheless discretely maintains these allusions to the violent and makeshift quality of township life.

While absorbing the structure, equilibrium and uniformity of the modernist grid, the insistent narrativity of Mautloa's work prods through its materiality. The layers of gauze, through which the grids are structured, suggests not only a formal binding to the flatness of the surface, but also an action of healing and repair. The transition between transparency and opacity establishes a threshold, a place where interiority and exteriority intersect.

### **Santu Mofokeng — *The Black Photo Album: Look at me (1890-1950)***



The photographs presented here by Santu Mofokeng are part of a research project about the self-representation of black working- and middle-class people in South Africa in the years 1890-1950. Mofokeng chose this period, as it coincides with the time when, in his own words, 'the world went to war twice and South Africa was busy articulating, entrenching and legitimating a racist and oppressive political system that the United Nations identified as 'a crime against humanity'.'<sup>29</sup>

These re-photographed images are presented with as much documentation as Mofokeng is able to garner. Drawn from the private rather than public domain, they represent personal and familial aspirations, and as such, they are objects used as tokens or trophies of status and self-worth. With their sitters smartly attired and placed squarely in the format, addressing the photographer with solemn gaze, and with their neatly arranged interior settings and occasional props (a walking stick, a skin rug), these photographs operate as mnemonic triggers within oral family narratives ('this is my great grandfather...'). Whether treasured or discarded, these photographs point to discursive narratives within families and broader social groups.

One of the aims of Mofokeng's work is to create an archive that operates as an alternative to the official archive that documents this period, in which black people tended to be represented 'in their natural habitat' by white photographers, employing representational tropes of difference. In those conventional representations, black people are designated as 'natives' belonging to the 'great family of man,' and as such, are deployed in order to enshrine a reassuring classificatory knowledge.

### **Jo Ractliffe — *reShooting Diana***

Like the work of Santu Mofokeng, that of Jo Ractliffe underlines the constructed nature of photographic images, the ways in which photographs become sites for memory. Initially titled *Shooting Diana*, they acquired the 're' that evokes a process of filtering

<sup>29</sup> Santu Mofokeng, 'The Black photo album/Look at me', *NKA — Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Spring 1996.

and repetition after the entire exhibition crashed to the ground in Johannesburg, before it opened (1995).

The idea for this project came about when Jo Ractliffe's cameras were stolen. A friend gave her a toy camera — the kind called *Diana*. It has a plastic lens, fixed focus, and the only exposure control is a lever marked 'sunny' or 'cloudy'. Ractliffe used this camera in a desultory way to photograph things here and there: landmarks, certain drives, places that had a resonance for her from childhood. The fixed focus gives the chosen motifs a kind of arbitrariness that challenges conventional prejudices about what a photograph should be. This randomness is probed in motifs that show apparent non-places: not so much prospects or views, as interstitial spaces, the place between landmarks. In this way, they seem to create a gap in space, but also a fissure in time. Their transient imagery, their dim overall lighting, their fragmentary attention to idiosyncratic landmarks, the hazy vignetting within the image itself, all create a sense of melancholy that also smacks of menace. The creation of cinematographic expectation (any moment now, somewhere outside of the frame, something might happen) creates a disruptive sense of suspense. Circulating through these strange, moody images, hung placed back to back within their glazing, one feels a haunting, not so much by the ruins of childhood, as by the ruined nostalgia that regards this childhood as charmed.

### **Joachim Schoennfeldt — 1/4, 1/3, 1/2**

Much of what Joachim Schoennfeldt does is concerned with the relationship of objects to oral discourse, whether a narrative within traditional African culture, or conversations overheard on public transport in Johannesburg about the violence in that city. He explores the ways in which objects intervene in discourse: used symbolically or deictically to plump out verbal narratives or, contrariwise, inert until they are animated by language. Schoennfeldt's work embodies a reflection upon the shifting meanings of objects as they travel from one context to another. An example might be a mask that, in traditional African cultures, might form part of a dance ritual,

but whose status is altered once it is removed from that context, to become either curio or work of art.

Showing the diverse objects as 'an exhibition' (rather than, say, an installation) underlines their heterogeneity. *1/4, 1/3, 1/2*, the generic title, is also more descriptively applied to the three carved cows, alluding to their relative sizes. As in the work of Willem Boshoff, a complex conceptual articulation is harnessed to a loving and careful craftsmanship. On the cows, the painted landscape vignettes (with their droll allusion to the artist's own name in the caption *schönes feldt* — beautiful field) hark with gentle irony to the blond tonalities and flat, empty spaces, of the South African pastoral genre of the nineteenth century. In South Africa, as in Germany or America, the links between landscape and notions of national character were implicit in painting and literature, neutralising a sense of possession of the land. The multiple legs of the cows perform a paradoxical violence, preventing the animal from movement in any direction.

Violence is also implicit in the round wooden plaque, with its invitation to drive a square peg into a round hole. Like the cows, the object is not an autonomous, aesthetic object, but functions as a marker in oral narrative. Likewise, the photographic piece *What I see and what I do* registers, as though through peripheral vision, the agency or vestiges of the violence of Johannesburg through the artist's daily travels, on public transport or by foot, to and from his studio.

### **Penny Siopis – Eight Works**

Penny Siopis brings to the dense theoretical underpinnings of her work an unabashed and sensuous materiality. The sources for this body of work are very particular artefacts: they are hand-painted photographs in which the sitter provides a photographic portrait, head only; the body, suitably attired, is painted in. So, a young couple might request to be portrayed as bride and groom; or twins might be shown in their best party frocks. These photographs circulated in the private domain, presumably many were sent back home by migrant workers in order to dignify the self

and display legitimated urban status. Under the sign of the real, the photographs invoke a sense of dignity that is, at the same time, indicative of the sitters' need to control their own representations. As objects of desire, they represent an image of wholeness and social integration. Their significance, as Siopis points out, is to 'visualise the importance of the family and of relationships within the family' — affinities, alliances, allegiances.

Penny Siopis, whose work has often dealt with the relationship between self-representation and the complex politics of the representation of otherness, has filtered the source material and distanced it through the use of enlargement and monochrome. Like the first painter who intervened on the photographic surface, she adds colour by hand, as well as collaged objects that disrupt the continuity, both physical and semantic. These objects, metonymically or metaphorically related to the image in question, are invariably white. (The artist had explored the notion of whiteness as signifier in a video piece, dated 1995, in which white shoe-polish was painted onto the artist's back and a drawing scored into it.) Through the disruptive presence of these bricolaged objects, Siopis emphasises the paradoxical significance of white as a signifier in the discourse of race, where it is naturalised and functions as unmarked presence.

### **Gavin Youngue - *Giving the Drum Back to Europe and Sit Down, Benny***

Gavin Youngue, like Marc Edwards or Kendell Geers, is concerned with an articulation of multiple historical processes. *Giving Back the Drum to Europe* was initially conceived for Copenhagen '96: housed in a container with work by Billy Mandindi, it set up a critique of the problem of housing in South Africa,<sup>30</sup> while gathering a dense web of other allusions. Youngue has undertaken research into the history of land invasions in

<sup>30</sup> 'The phrase 'adequate shelter', to describe the minimal accommodation provided in the townships was first used significantly in the 1950's in the context of various actions taken to reinforce white control of black movement and labour', Gavin Youngue, op.cit. p26.

the Western Cape, collecting data through oral histories and the printed media. Memory is constructed through an incantatory listing (inscribed on narrow metal friezes) of the names of squatter communities culled from the press.

The scribing function is re-articulated in the writing that appears on the parchment – like skin covering the car doors: at once scars and tattoos, graffiti and palimpsest, the words are punning plays on local references. Cars themselves are over-determined symbolic objects in the South African context: as status objects for the rich, they are, simultaneously, pretexts for pride and easy targets for hijackings and vandalism. In poorer urban contexts, they provide an indispensable ticket (*kaartjie*) to a freedom translated as mobility: distances are big and punctuated by the obstacles and barricades that are vestiges of apartheid, both visible and invisible. Communal taxis in urban centres are famous for their reckless driving and for the so-called ‘taxi wars’ they generate. Resembling the skin of a drum, the vellum tightly encases the car doors: sutured to fit like gloves over the doors, the vellum transports its own charge, at once violent and protective. The drum, which Younge suggests is a European stereotype connoting ‘Africa,’ is re-presented both as gift and as admonition.

*Sit Down, Benny* (the title comes from one of the books) employs a similar embalming process (stretched vellum) on a pile of books. The number of books is determined by the size of the metal trunk in which they are transported. Reiterating the idea of history as a scribe, Younge has chosen books that epitomise the apartheid ideology of ‘separate development’ and segregated education. Like Moshekwa Langa, he uses the book as a token for the construction of identity: the concealment of the books renders them objects of readerly desire, and as such, the books simultaneously obscure and memorialise.